MISSOURI EXCEL CENTER PROGRAM:
EVALUATION OF ADULT HIGH SCHOOLS

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by:

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MISSOURI EXCEL CENTER PROGRAM: EVALUATION OF ADULT HIGH
SCHOOLS

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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**Dedication**

Above all else, this is for my father Rev. Dr. Theodore Fonda Cole. His love, guidance, and patience for me during his time on this earth was more than I deserved. I know that if he were here with us today, he would be proud.

This is also for my family and loved ones, who over the course of these last few years have endured immeasurable sacrifice to offer me the opportunity to perform this monumental achievement. Without them, I would not have had the courage to persevere, nor the commitment to maintain my life’s passion for education.
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ABSTRACT

In 2010, Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana opened its first Excel Center adult high schools aimed at assisting adults in obtaining a high school diploma and transitioning those adults into higher education, industry certifications, and the workforce completely tuition free. MERS Goodwill, the largest Missouri branch of Goodwill (excluding Kansas City and western portions of the state), opened its first schools in 2018 (The Excel Center, 2021). The purpose of this study is to conduct a program (impact) evaluation on the Missouri Excel Centers. The following study explores the background, history, and operations of the Missouri Excel Center program. The researcher utilized archival data as reported by graduates to determine what impacts the program has had and who is benefiting by using the Missouri House Bill 680 (99th general assembly) as a benchmark for analysis on outcomes.

The Missouri Excel Center program is generating an impact on its graduates via higher education and industry certifications, employment, and wages. The program serves a racially diverse student body who are primarily female with an average age of 37. The implications of the study include a recommendation that Missouri Excel Center program develop methods of tracking wages and government assistance to report the benefits. This includes reduced or eliminated dependency on government assistance programs, increased tax revenues earned by the state, and generational financial impact on families. Future research should use qualitative research to track data based on graduates’ lived experiences to identify aspects of the program that are generating the most impact attributing to graduate success.
SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION
Background

The term “high school” evokes a variety of memories, emotions, and positionality for many people in the United States. Whether thinking about athletics, academics, college preparedness, educational gaps, poverty, and countless components of high school, there is typically a common theme or understanding of what a high school is. However, for most of the population, adult education is not a term closely associated with high school until recently. This is because most U.S. citizens earn their high school diploma from a traditional educational institution. The following research study is aimed at exploring the concept of adult education in high school, why they exist, who they serve, and what impact they have.

In the United States, approximately 12% of adults 18 and over do not have a high school diploma or diploma equivalent. In 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau published a report showing that out of 251,268,403 adult respondents, 30,337,897 have not received a diploma (United States Census Bureau, 2019). In the United States 2 million students drop out of high school every year (Fry, 2014). In addition, 24.9% of adults over the age of 25 without a high school diploma report being below the poverty threshold as opposed to four percent for individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2019). The poverty threshold is defined by annual household income of $25,701 for a family of four (ASPE, 2020). These statistics outline how the relationship between obtaining a high school education and higher education directly relate to a family’s poverty status. While these statistics may not be shocking to some, these rates have only been increasing in the United States since the 1960s (Fry, 2014).
Goodwill Industries International (Goodwill) is an organization dedicated to providing employment opportunities for individuals in need. Widely known for its retail stores that feature donated goods and merchandise, Goodwill also operates career centers and offers training and career placement services. In 2010, Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana opened its first Excel Center adult high schools aimed at assisting adults in obtaining a high school diploma and transitioning those adults into higher education, industry certifications, and the workforce. In addition, all the offered services are completely free of charge. After thousands of students graduated from Excel Center schools in Indiana, MERS Goodwill, the Missouri branch of Goodwill, determined there was a need for the Excel Center program and opened its first schools in 2018 (GEI, 2021). Missouri currently has over 500,000 adults over the age of 21 without a high school diploma which translates to a median income gap of over $10,000 annually compared to individuals who have either obtained a diploma or high school equivalent (Capital One, 2023). This was the initial premise for selecting it as a state to open Excel Center schools.

The Excel Center national program spans across six states, the District of Columbia, and consists of 33 adult high schools with plans to open more. The national program oversees the schools originally opened in Indiana and assists other divisions of Goodwill across the country to ensure successful launches of Excel Centers. An operation of this magnitude that has plans for expansion is not without its challenges and drawbacks. Each division of Goodwill that currently operates an Excel Center school is funded differently by both state and private monies raised from the organization and retail locations. They are also bound by each state’s individual requirements for diploma
acquisition, as well as outcome measures tied to any public/state funding. For the Excel Center schools to be deemed beneficial and begin to start changing the employment narrative for those adults without diplomas, they must first prove to be effective, efficient, and a worthwhile investment for state funding.

One measure of success for an adult high school program is the issuance of diplomas. However, for all the Excel Center schools, there are outcome measures related to the mission of Goodwill. Through adult high schools, a diploma is merely the first step to changing the impact on graduates’ lives. Utilizing organizational partnerships and venues for higher education and professional certifications, the program’s final goal includes outcomes of equitable, sustainable, and improved employment. The mission statement of the Missouri Excel Center program is the same as MERS Goodwill: “changing lives through the power of work” (MERS Goodwill, 2020, “About the Excel Center” section). This concept defines the notion of gainful employment in that consistent, equitable work translates to a decrease in poverty for individuals. Although the program in Missouri is still being developed, it has been opened long enough (2018) for data to be collected and analyzed. It is within this context that a program evaluation should be performed on the Missouri Excel Center program. The program aims to continue expansion within the state and with other states and organizations interested in creating adult high schools, it would be critical for an evaluation to outline impact for the current program while highlighting viable practices to benefit interested programs outside the state.

**Statement of the Problem**

In the United States, 27% of available jobs require less than a high school diploma and that percentage is declining (Torpey & Watson, 2014). Acknowledging the
relationship between educational completion and gainful employment, the question is not whether to adjust the way schools currently operate, but how to provide high school education for adults. While laws vary from state to state, no state (excluding Texas) requires or allows for traditional public education past the age of 22 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). This means that while a state may be required to offer public education up to a certain age, it cannot offer public funded education to a student past the age of 22. Adult high schools however are not limited by a maximum age and can be utilized on a larger age spectrum. With the potential to change the lives of over 30 million adults in the U.S., including 500,000 Missourians, adult high school programs are faced with increasing responsibility to provide high school education to adults. The problem with the increasing numbers of adults without high school diplomas is not limited to an increase in poverty within the demographic; it extends to generational poverty and education. Children of parents without high school diplomas have an increased chance of dropping out of high school and are 2.4 times more likely to face challenges related to poverty simply because a parental family member was unsuccessful in high school completion (Educational Data Initiative, 2019). While the reason for operating an adult high school program can be summarized by changing the narrative for generational educational impact and gainful employment, another problem that exists in Missouri is that current and potential program benefit has yet to be studied. Without research, it becomes more challenging for adult high school programs to advocate for funding without supporting data outlining the benefits.

With total numbers of adults without diplomas increasing across the United States, numbers of alternative high school equivalency programs are also increasing to
meet demand (Ades, 2020). This increase ties to Title II of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) that federally supports three types of adult education programs including English as a second language, adult basic education, and adult secondary education (United States Department of Labor, 2021). Title II was a direct result of the combination of labor markets reporting a shortage of skilled laborers and the increasing number of working age adults who lacked the ability to earn skilled industry certifications due to the absence of a high school certificate of completion (United States Department of Labor, 2021). WIOA funding extends to secondary education programs designed for adults who have passed the maximum age limit (21 in most states) for free education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Research on competency based adult high school diplomas in the state of Minnesota concluded that while there is significant research conducted on post-secondary education for the adult learner, there is little existing research on adult oriented secondary education (Ades, 2020). (This does not include programs that are considered alternate secondary equivalency certification such as the General Education Development Test or GED, and High School Equivalency Test or HiSET.) Ades (2020) continued by stating the recent increase of such adult high school programs, relating to interest and funding by workforce development, did not exist in previous generations of students.

The National Center for Education Evaluation and the United States Department of Education in conjunction with the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) published a study snapshot in April 2021. This study confirmed that there existed a total of 22 high quality studies that examined whether strategies and programs improved adult learner outcomes (National Center for Education Evaluation, 2021). The study team found that of
the 2,000 publicly available references to adult education in research, 54 studied
effectiveness of adult learning strategies, with only 22 meeting standards regarding
educational progress, employment, or earnings of learners (National Center for Education
Evaluation, 2021). The study further determined that specifically regarding categories of
adult education, only three studies focused on adult secondary education, with one
mentioning earnings and employment as opposed to the majority (14 of 22) focusing on
adult academic skills and abilities (National Center for Education Evaluation, 2021). IES
also identified there is no existing research that focused on program impact on the lives
of adults unless it solely relates to academic comprehension (National Center for

This gap in research supports the notion that there is a need for scholarly research
and study on the impact of adult high school programs as they expand across the United
States. Currently, the Missouri Excel Center schools are the only in-person adult high
school programs in the state, and an impact evaluation has yet to be conducted. Where
there is statistical data provided by both institutions and the U.S. Census Bureau, an
analysis has not been conducted on the outcome measurements in adult high schools in
Missouri. Therefore, little is known about the impact of the Excel Center schools on
students. Currently, there is no research or method outside legislative metrics to provide
data to support whether the program is “doing well” or to that end what impact is being
made for graduates of the program. Completing an analysis on the outcome measures of
the Missouri Excel Center program will also serve to discover “who” is benefitting from
the program itself. When complete, the research can aid such programs in expanding and
requesting funding by providing the experiences as reported by graduates to how
impactful the program has been for them and to the countless individuals who could benefit from a similar program or expanded in a different region. To be effective in addressing the social and economic inequities related to high school education, research must be conducted first outlining the impact and benefits of the Missouri Excel Center program.

**Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to conduct a program evaluation on the Missouri Excel Center program and to identify what effects program outcomes mean for the state of Missouri. This study will measure the impact of the program in the state of Missouri and can be used as a foundation to predict program impact on a larger scale extending to programs in multiple states. The results of this evaluation study will aid program development specific to the Missouri Excel Center schools and will extend as an example for impact of adult high school programs.

To determine a measurable degree of impact, the parameters defining impact will include inputs versus outputs. This study will collect information on the students (inputs) attending the Missouri Excel Centers and then determine what impact completion of the program has on graduates using outcomes (outputs). Stakeholders that contribute financially to adult high school programs, such as state and private monies, would benefit from the results of this study to aid in making future decisions regarding funding. States and districts wanting to see change in the statistics of high school graduates and the associated poverty rates would be served by understanding the study and finding to determine if a similar program would benefit another geographical location.
The secondary purpose of this research is to add scholarly context and insight by presenting information where limited research exists (Ades, 2020; National Center for Education Evaluation, 2021). As more states continue to adopt program models aimed at high school equivalency for adults, this research will discover the impact of the program located in Missouri and can offer generalizability to interested stakeholders in other locations to determine potential program benefits. The byproduct of adding to the limited existing research is increasing awareness of both the need for similar programs and accessibility to potential students.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question seeks to explore the impact of adult high schools on its students. What impact is the Missouri Excel Center program having on students? Research will be broken down into two parts to further elaborate on how the term “impact” is defined. First, as defined by the Missouri legislature in conjunction with MERS Goodwill, what outcome goals has the current program achieved since opening in 2018? Additionally, what additional impacts, as reported by graduates, is the program having? Specifically, analyzing what graduates have reported within six months of graduation.

The second research question will be answered after analysis of outcomes and data as reported by graduates has been completed. Who has benefitted from attending The Missouri Excel Center program? By analyzing the outcomes and data, the researcher will be able to present findings on any reported changes, benefits, and impact the program has had so future stakeholders and students may be informed. The focus will remain specifically on graduates of the Missouri Excel Center program as it has been in
operation for over five years and has yet to have a program evaluation conducted. To summarize the two research questions,

1. What impact is the Missouri Excel Center program having on students?
2. Who has benefitted from completion of the Missouri Excel Center program?

**Framework**

The primary framework driving the research is program theory. Program theory is the understanding of the process that connects programs to their desired outcomes, and the basis of why programs do what they do to reach those outcomes (Rossi et al., 2004). Impact theory is the secondary framework and revolves around the understanding that having evidenced impact of a program generates increased value of the program itself (National Health Services, 2017). Both program and impact theory lay the foundation for the fundamentals behind conducting a program evaluation on the Missouri Excel Center program.

**Program Theory**

Understanding program goals and discovering what a program is accomplishing summarizes the concept of program theory. Rossi explained that if stakeholders do not have a clear understanding of what a program is supposed to be doing, or what measures are in place for measuring a program’s outcomes, it will be difficult to evaluate and may be problematic for the program’s future (2004). For example, in education, program theory is the binding agent that connects students to the desired outcomes while outlining the change students will be engaged in to meet those outcomes. The relevancy is the understanding behind what students are doing in a program that is leading to outcomes in the simplest form as opposed to analysis on the performance itself.
Program theory focuses on the reasons a program’s outcomes are achieved or not. This is performed through researching independent variables and analysis to create cause and effect statements that should be bound by evidence to support such statements. The notion of strong cause and effect statements backed by evidence are indicative of strong program theory and are considered more credible in the realm of research (Pope et al., 2019). In education, an example of strong program theory may be explained by two groups of students taking the same test. Over the course of three years one group was exposed to selected study materials 48 hours before the test and a control group was not. The control group without access to study materials consistently scored at a state and national average. However, the group with access to selected study materials consistently performed at a rate of 20% higher. Provided there are no other variables that could explain the increase in test scores, strong program theory suggests by providing study materials 48 hours in advance of testing should increase test scores. When looking at the desired outcomes for students enrolled in the Excel Center program, program theory should connect the lived experiences of students enrolled in the program to determine what impact is being made.

**Impact Theory**

The secondary framework pertinent to the research is impact theory. The research questions ask what impact the Missouri Excel Center program is having on students and who has benefitted from completing the program. Viewing the research through the lens of impact theory allows for the program to not only identify the impacts it is having on the students but creates a venue for further research and analysis for creating change.
According to National Health Services (2017), utilizing the framework for impact theory incorporates a process involving three primary steps:

1. Communicate what will change and why. Often a logic model can be used to create theory of change.

2. Showcase output and outcome measures and compile evidence to identifying change.

3. Review change after key milestones, determine if intended or unintended consequences and repeat the cycle as needed.

The third step of the impact framework is designed to encompass avenues to develop improvements for a program. The research for this study is to identify and extrapolate the impacts being made by the Missouri Excel Center program. It is not intended to create suggestions for improvements, nor is it intended to analyze the efficiency of the current program model. Rather, it is intended to highlight impacts, verify outcomes, and ultimately showcase the research in a manner that would allow stakeholders to have a clear understanding of what the program is accomplishing via program and impact theory. Therefore, utilizing program theory, and seeking to understand the adult high school program’s impact on students, a program evaluation and impact assessment (evaluation) is used to answer the research question.

**Program (Impact) Evaluation**

Program and impact theory frameworks can be useful in conducting a program evaluation for the purpose of understanding what benefits or impact the program is having. This specific type of program evaluation that measures the impact of the program is known as an impact evaluation. This evaluation does not only serve to determine the
scale of benefit of the program but influence effectiveness and outcomes. An impact evaluation assesses a program’s effectiveness in reaching its goals by providing quantitative estimates of effects of programs. Newcomer et al. (2018) stated “the purpose of most impact evaluations is to isolate the effects of a program to help officials and citizens to decide whether the program should be continued, improved, or expanded to other areas” (p.137).

Newcomer et al. (2015), suggested that there are five main questions to be asked when deciding to commit to a program evaluation.

- Can the results of the evaluation influence decision-making?
- Can it be performed in time to be of use?
- Is the program significant enough?
- Is performance viewed as problematic?
- Where is the program in its stage of development?

The responses to these questions regarding the Missouri Excel Center program merit an impact evaluation to be conducted. The findings can assist program leadership (district and school administration) and stakeholders (MERS Goodwill executives, financial partners, and lawmakers) in decision making toward the program and potential advancement and improvements. The results are disseminated in a timely manner for the organization and stakeholders to use. The program and all it strives to change regarding education, poverty, and educational continuance across multiple generations is significant. Performance may not immediately be viewed as problematic; however, leadership acknowledges there are always areas for improvements and increasing efficiency. The Missouri Excel Center schools, specifically, were established in the fall of
2018 and could greatly benefit from an evaluation to discover what is working efficiently and what could be improved.

Outcome measures agreed upon by both Goodwill and the Missouri state legislature keep the schools accountable according to its previously stated mission statement. Missouri House Bill (H.B.) 680 (2017) outlines key guidelines for expected outcomes from adult high schools in Missouri. These include (a) “at least fifty percent of the school’s graduates will attain an industry certification or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation,” (b) “at least eighty-five percent of the school’s graduates who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training will be employed within six months of graduation”, and (c) “the school’s graduates who enter the workforce shall have, on average, a wage rate at least twenty percent greater than the average Missouri wage rate for individuals without high school diplomas” (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4). These outcome measures will guide the research driving the impact evaluation and isolate areas identified for improvements with the process evaluation.

**Research Design**

The primary research design revolves around conducting and utilizing a program evaluation, more specifically an impact evaluation. This will be achieved by obtaining and using quantitative outcome/archival data from the Missouri Excel Center schools and its students. A simple logic model is utilized as a guiding principle for research design. The model illustrates the inputs as students entering the program, the activities as services provided by the Excel Center program, and finally immediate outputs (measured within one year of graduation) students are achieving (Fig. 1).
When determining what impact the Missouri Excel Center program is making, the program’s quantitative outcome measures will serve as a baseline. These outcome measures are the same as outlined in the previously mentioned Missouri House Bill (H.B.) 680 (2017). Specifically, is the program achieving (a) “at least fifty percent of the school’s graduates will attain an industry certification or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation,” (b) “at least eighty-five percent of the school’s graduates who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training will be employed within six months of graduation”, and (c) “the school’s graduates who enter the workforce shall have, on average, a wage rate at least twenty percent greater than the average Missouri wage rate for individuals without high school diplomas” (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4)? Data is obtained continuously by MERS Goodwill starting at student enrollment through one year following graduation. This data is analyzed to determine whether the Excel Center program is meeting its outcome goals and will serve as the quantitative foundation to measure impact.

Additional data is pulled from administered graduate questionnaires asking about their life situations post-graduation from the Missouri Excel Center program. Since 2019,
the Missouri Excel Center program has been tracking outcome measures as related to Missouri H.B. 680. To do this, MERS Goodwill developed a proprietary digital communication system known as “MyMERS” that compiles student data and incorporates digital communications to disseminate information, such as surveys, via email and text messaging on cellular devices to increase the scope of communication.

The researcher performed an analysis on the self-reported graduate responses from questionnaires sent out digitally via SMS/text messages to determine the following:

1. Can the return on investment (ROI) for the Missouri Excel Center be determined and is it beneficial to stakeholders?
2. What can the data inform about the impact the Missouri Excel Center is having in Missouri?
3. Who has benefitted from completion of the program? Specifically what draw is the Excel Center of Missouri having and to whom?
4. What further research could be conducted to explore program growth and development?

This concept is the driving force behind exploring what is not captured by the data from the quantitative measures outlined in Missouri H.B. 680. Analysis aides quantitative research by allowing analysis to be a dynamic process as opposed to a static outcome (Garbarino & Holland, 2009). For this study, the researcher presents quantitative analysis findings to determine the impact the Excel Center program is having in Missouri.
Setting

The setting for primary data collection is the four Missouri Excel Center schools operating in the cities of Columbia, Poplar Bluff, Saint Louis, and Springfield. (In 2023, there have been two more Excel Center school openings in Missouri, however at the time of this writing, there have yet to be students to have acquired the credits to have graduated or surveyed, and therefore will not be a part of this study.) The locations were selected to host Excel Center school because they are within MERS Goodwill’s operational geographic (majority of the state of Missouri excluding Kansas City) and preliminary research indicated the population density of adults without a high school credential would warrant opening schools (ranging 150-400 enrolled students at each). While each center is considered an independent school, they collectively comprise the Missouri Excel Center District. This means that certain characteristics of each school follow a unified district standard, while allowing for unique settings and operations to be managed at an individual local level. Each school is staffed with one director, multiple life coaches who serve as student counselors, instructors who teach both core and elective curricula, and on-site daycare staff (excelcenter.org, 2021).

The demographic of each school does vary in ethnic diversity, and key differences include the student population size. Saint Louis has the capacity to serve over 450 students any given term, Springfield and Columbia over 200, and Poplar Bluff more than 100. Because each school setting is also different, barriers faced by students will vary from school to school (MERS Goodwill, 2020, “About the Excel Center” section). Students attending a rural location such as Poplar Bluff may experience greater difficulty in attending courses in person due to travelling distance, whereas students attending
urban locations such as Saint Louis may find housing or availability of food and resources to be greater barriers.

Participants

The participants in the study are graduates of the Missouri Excel Center schools. As the Missouri schools opened in the fall of 2018, these students have participated and graduated from the program as early as 2019. (Not all students transfer in the same amount of acquired credits so many can graduate in as little as one eight-week term/semester). These participants were targeted because they have first-hand experience and knowledge of the Missouri Excel Center program and are the only individuals who can provide data pertaining to the research questions. Because the study is an impact evaluation, the entirety of data collected directly involves graduates as opposed to that of current or former students. As former Director of the Springfield Excel Center, the researcher was given access to the district’s student information system and can work with current administration to obtain survey data from graduates.

It is pertinent to mention that at no point were the participants coerced and/or otherwise required to submit data and insight. While voluntary by nature, the primary motivator for participation is to collect information and gain understanding as to the impact of the Missouri Excel Center program and learn from research to provide suggestions for improvement. As the program itself is entirely free of charge to students, participation was and is encouraged to continue the program’s legacy for current and future students.

By utilizing complete sampling for participants across the four schools, the results achieve credibility as no one demographic was isolated and focused on solely for
evaluative purposes limiting the potential for a controlled narrative (Fink, 2017). Every graduate of the program receives the survey in intervals of three, six, and 12-months post-graduation. For example, if a convenience sample was utilized in a survey, only those motivated to complete the survey, whether more heavily invested in the program, or those who have had experiences either extremely positive or negative would be most likely to respond (Fink, 2017). The four Missouri Excel Center schools, having graduated collectively more than 900 students and currently having over 800 students enrolled, has generated a sample size greater than 800 responses and over a thousand data points. This would mean that after determining how many sub-groups exist in the sample, the margin of error can be limited and identified creating a purposeful sample size (Fink, 2017).

**Data Collection Tools**

The research includes quantitative data and analysis, making it a quantitative study (Mertens, 2019). To properly determine what impact the Missouri Excel Center program is having on students requires more than reporting strictly numerical data sets. Because Mertens (2019) stated numerical and quantitative analysis would be left to less interpretation as opposed to qualitative research, the primary data collection design revolves around previous and current quantitative data (archival data) obtained from the Missouri Excel Center schools. Then, by utilizing application and analysis, the researcher identifies what specifically the data collected can inform on the impact of the Missouri Excel Center program on its graduates. The numerical data obtained directly relates to the program’s outcome measures as outlined in Missouri legislation (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4).

- What percentage of graduates obtained industry certifications, enroll in higher education, or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation?
• What percentage of students who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training are employed within six months of graduation?

• What is the average wage rate for graduates that enter the workforce?

To answer these questions, the researcher accessed the Missouri Excel Center’s reporting data that has been collected since its opening in 2018. This information is collected by each school in the district and presented by Goodwill annually.

When discussing collecting evaluation data, Caffarella and Daffron (2013), highlighted optimal techniques for collecting data in planning programs and evaluation for adult learners. Included in these techniques are survey tools (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013). Additional data was obtained to discover how the Missouri Excel Center program has impacted a student’s life. As of this research study, the archival data from the proprietary surveys disseminated by MERS Goodwill have resulted in over 800 total responses from graduates from 2019 through 2022. This archival data serves as the basis for analysis on the impact the program has had on graduates.

**Surveys**

Surveys can obtain information reliably and efficiently if performed accurately (Newcomer et al., 2015). The surveys that are sent out to graduates ask participants to share their current educational, employment, and financial status after graduating from the Excel Center. The survey did not ask graduates about what services offered through the Missouri Excel Center program contributed to their success. The rationale behind this logic is removing graduate speculation that may or may not prove fruitful to the program’s goals. In addition, the survey did not ask what graduates felt *could* have been offered to enhance their program experience. The rationale behind speculative reasoning
also contributes to the omission of this line of reasoning. Fink (2017) pointed out that by not adhering to this format (omission of speculative questioning), participants engaged in the survey may be given false hope that may not or cannot be fulfilled. As stated previously this study focused on the measurable impact of the Missouri Excel Center program on students, not potential impact of the Excel Center on students.

The method of data collection for the surveys was digital, utilizing both SMS text via cellular devices and email. This method has been conducted since 2019 utilizing MERS Goodwill’s proprietary program “MyMERS” that compiles personal information of students to disseminate information on a larger scale. Participants were contacted using both their cellular phone numbers and their personal emails addresses they have either registered with prior to program enrollment or have updated post-graduation. (The Excel Center program requires outcome data to be collected via student communication for one year following graduation and therefore updates student contact information at graduation and periodically leading up to one year afterward.) This archival data was collected by MERS Goodwill quarterly and was shared with the researcher to analyze and determine significance through findings. This data was through May 2023 and includes graduate reporting from graduates of May 12th, 2023.
**Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data was used for complementarity or enhancement from quantitative sources (Mertens, 2019). This means that when compiling the data from measured outcomes as a direct result of the Missouri Excel Center program (employment post-graduation, wages, higher education, and earned professional certifications), responses from graduates included within a survey will provide depth and understanding to outcome data. The process for analysis consisted of multiple stages.

To address the primary research question asking what impact is being made by the Missouri Excel Center program, outcome data for the Missouri Excel Center Schools was compared against the program’s legislative goals (as outlined in H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4).

- What percentage of graduates obtained industry certifications, enroll in higher education, or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation?
- What percentage of students who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training are employed within six months of graduation?
- What is the average wage rate for graduates that enter the workforce?

First, the researcher presents outcome results and levy data against the Missouri House Bill (H.B.) 680 (2017) to determine performance as measured by the state and MERS Goodwill. Secondly, the findings were analyzed to determine what impact the program has had on students by self-reported graduate data obtained by surveys provided by MERS Goodwill. The measure for analysis consisted of whether the Missouri Excel Center program achieved the benchmarks as outlined in H.B. 680, and how those statistics can translate to program impact on its graduates. The impact based on
benchmark statistics was compared (if applicable) to non-diploma holding adults in Missouri to complete a comparison. Third, a financial benefit analysis determined if the Missouri Excel Center program can develop a measurable ROI, and what benchmark or qualification would present a positive (profitable) return. To do so requires analyzing the costs of a program and the financial return on investments from funding sources. Finally, analysis of who is benefitting from the Missouri Excel Center program is provided. To answer the question of who benefits, the researcher compared the results of the provided archival data and determine what benefit the program could be having on the state, the students enrolled, and future students. Analysis also determined what stakeholders are benefitting from the program such as MERS Goodwill, taxpayers, educational programs, and potentially other organizations interested in adult high school education.

It is pertinent to highlight that the program qualifies as having generated impact if since 2018, it has met larger than 0% of its outcome measures. If the program did not always meet legislative goals, that does not mean it did not create impact; it means that the measurable numerical impact was not meeting outcome goals. The analysis presents what statistical impact is being made using outcome goals and then state to what percentage of the outcome goals, is the impact having.

The responses from the “MyMERS” surveys answer the following questions:

- What are graduates current educational status?
- Are graduates experiencing barriers to further education?
- Were graduates ever enrolled in higher education/trade school?
- If applicable, what program and location has the graduate participated in?
- How many industry certifications have graduates earned?
• Graduate employment status, barriers, job description and wages.

• Did the graduate earn an industry certification or earn college credits while attending the Excel Center program in Missouri?

Research includes quantitative data results and analysis determining how the program impacts students in Missouri. Complete with specific demographic, outcome, and survey responses, the researcher analyzed and reported on not only whom the program serves, but who would benefit from said program. This analysis informs potential new students and organizations in position to refer new students (government assistance offices, educational establishments, employment services) to identify the potential benefits of the program itself and to what degree the program can assist in changing an individual’s educational and employment situation.

Quality of Research

The primary researcher in the study (myself) would be considered a stakeholder in the National Excel Center program and adult high school development. As the former school director at the Springfield Excel Center located in Missouri and the former school director for the Excel Center located in Phoenix, Arizona, there are biases that must be addressed before research can commence. I will state researcher positionality in its entirety.

The political, cultural, educational, and employment history of the researcher is diverse. Before becoming a director of an Excel Center, the researcher spent seven years as an educator and has over 15 years of management, sales, and retail experience. The researcher’s own educational experience stems from rural public schools, large suburban public schools, and even includes a private college preparatory boarding school. Higher
education for the researcher consisted of a large midwestern public university for obtaining a bachelor’s degree, a smaller private university for completion of a master’s degree in education and returning to the large midwestern public university for doctoral studies in an Educational Leadership program. The researcher was raised in a multi-cultural family and is currently part of a multi-cultural family of his own.

The researcher understands his positionality to be a part of the research whether conscious or not. As a stakeholder via former employment, it could be in the researcher’s interest to present selective positive findings that would put the adult high school program in a positive frame of reference solely outlining positive impact. (The researcher continues to be a supporter of the program and an advocate despite no longer benefiting directly as a result of employment.) It is also being taken into consideration the number of responses could potentially be higher from the Springfield, Missouri location as students may recognize the researcher as their former school director. However, it is not believed to skew data as currently there have been over 800 graduates from the Missouri Excel Center program, with a little over 100 having graduated under the researcher’s employment. The researcher does understand that while conducting research, he may be less likely to question the integrity of findings that support the positive impacts of the adult high school program, and more so with findings that do not. It is also possible for the researcher to omit or not engage in searching for data that may challenge the benefits of adult high schools. Awareness of such potential transgressions will aid the researcher in developing personal protocols to continually challenge the research and findings. To further the accuracy and integrity of research collected, the researcher will incorporate the assistance of research specialists who are not stakeholders in the Excel Center
program to challenge the quality, quantity, accuracy, uniformity, and completeness of methodology and findings (Newcomer et al., 2018).

To fully answer the research questions regarding impact on students’ lives and who has benefitted from the program, careful research must be performed and presented in its entirety. It would be in the researcher’s best interest to present findings in its entirety so that regardless of the quality of impact the program has on students (positive or otherwise), other stakeholders can use the findings to drive program change or expansion if desired. Being a stakeholder of the program allows for unobstructed attainment of quantitative data and will allow for genuine data to be retrieved as participants may see the stakeholder as a person who has some influence over policy as opposed to an outsider gathering information without influence.

The survey must also be considered high quality for the research to hold significance. To minimize margin of error the survey results (archival data) were made available to the entire district graduate base (consisting of over 800 participants ensuring a statistically accurate representation for the study (Fink, 2017; Mertens, 2019; Seidman, 2019). The very nature of the Excel Center program is to offer a pathway for a high school diploma for adults who for whatever reason were unsuccessful in their youth. Therefore, the survey was created with a 7th grade comprehension level. Research shows that if comprehension levels are at a grade level above the participants capability, the results of data obtained will not be as accurate or definitive in nature (Walters & Hamrell, 2008). Research performed by the National Adult Literacy Survey indicate that the average American adult comprehends literacy at a 9th grade level (Walters & Hamrell, 2008). Utilizing the Flesch-Kincaid readability software located at webfx.com, the
researcher determined a score of below 8.0 translating to a less-than 8th grade reading level ensuring that Excel Center student participants were able to comprehend the material regardless of their academic progress in the program (Walters & Hamrell, 2008).

To summarize, the researcher will be entering the research study with a diverse background, an open mind to obtaining varied results, has benefits to being a stakeholder to the program, and with assistance, will reframe all data collections consistently to challenge his methods and findings. Graduates have equitable access and opportunity to participate in the surveys. These were conducted at a district-wide level to capture the largest audience with equivalent representation. In addition, the surveys are comprehensible at a 7th grade level to ensure that responses were less likely to produce a wide margin of error.

**Significance**

When determining the significance of a study, it may be asked why this research matters. With over 10% of the adult population not currently holding high school diplomas in the United States, and of that percent over 24% reporting being below the federal poverty threshold, there are many who stand to benefit from adult high school programs (US Census Bureau, 2019). With approximately 2 million more “dropping-out” of high school each year, creating beneficial programs to change these individuals’ lives seek to not only change the standard of living, but prevent the gap produced by generational poverty and education. There may come a day when the educational system changes these numbers; however, by starting this change on the adult spectrum, this affords opportunity at an increased chance of success to the children currently engaged in the educational system. This study will immediately assist the Missouri Excel Centers to
enhance performance. Once the research is complete and the student impact has been explored, other invested stakeholders can determine practice to expand the program on a larger scale and begin to reverse national statistics. As current literature is relatively limited around adult high schools, this research could shed valuable insight to the program and its effectiveness in reaching its goals.

Another area of significance to this study would be to raise both stakeholder and potential stakeholder awareness. This awareness will allow current and future stakeholders to view the program as a contender for investment and avenue for change in current educational practice. Ultimately, the stakeholders that the educational and poverty statistics directly involve are the students themselves. Students may ask, why should I enroll into adult high school? Is this program for me? How do I know that an investment of my time is best served spent on this program? The significance of this study will directly impact student stakeholders and assist adults in discovering venues toward adult education and limit education disparity across generations.

**Summary**

In summation, while the scope of this study incorporates the Missouri Excel Centers, the implications of this research can be extended to a state or even national level. The purpose is to determine what impact the adult high school program is having on students in Missouri. An impact program evaluation would serve to illustrate exactly what the Missouri Excel Center schools are doing and what impact they are having on long-term outcomes for its participants. Further research derived from this study may include a process evaluation to determine what ways the program can execute strategies for improvement.
The primary researcher in this study can be considered a stakeholder in the Excel Center program as he was a previous director for both Springfield, Missouri and Phoenix, Arizona. The researcher continues to be an advocate of the program, and educational advancement for underserved populations. To mitigate bias and correctly present accurate data, the researcher will primarily collect quantitative data and present analysis in aggregate. This will be supplemented with qualitative research suggestions for further research where inferences and analysis opportunities can be made. The researcher understands his positionality as a stakeholder and will take effort and precautions to mitigate bias and influence while subsequently acknowledging no research conducted will be completely devoid of bias and influence.

By conducting a program evaluation research study, investment-stakeholders both current and future, can benefit from the supplied information to drive decision making and determine what resources should be applied to strengthen existing programs or create new ones. The results may also benefit student stakeholders in determining the advantages of an adult high school program and allow students to begin a course of action toward changing their employability while promoting educational success for future generations.
SECTION TWO: PRACTITIONER CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY
**Contextual Overview**

Before understanding how an impact analysis will be presented and implemented for the Excel Center program, a breakdown of several components must be reviewed and put into context. The place of practice is the Missouri Excel Center schools; however, the findings can immediately be utilized across the national program of schools. In this section of study (practitioner context), the need for the program will be explored. This will include the educational and economic context for why programs such as the Excel Center exists. After reviewing the need for Excel Center programs, an in-depth look at how the current program came into existence and began implementation across the United States will be provided, ultimately transitioning to the unique elements of the program specific to Missouri. Finally, opportunities for implementation of the impact analysis study will be reviewed including how decision-making stakeholders could benefit from this research.

**The Need**

Since 2012, the University of Notre Dame’s Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO) in conjunction with The Excel Center has been conducting ongoing research pertaining to the national need for adult high school programs. The findings not only delve into the socio-economic need that has been changing since the program’s inception over a decade ago in 2010, but many outcomes based on the performance of students. The scope of the research has now included the multiple states that have since opened an Excel Center school and is updated annually.
Economic Impact

Currently more than 18 million adults in the United States do not possess a high school diploma and young adults under the age of 24 who hold a diploma earn wages 77% higher than those who do not (Brough et al., 2021). Only 53% of these young adults who do not possess a diploma found employment in 2020-2021 and amassed average annual earnings of $16,000 (Brough et al., 2021). Notre Dame’s LEO discovered that these employment rates and earnings gap continued into adulthood (2021). Comparing strictly high school diploma attainment, adults aged 19-30 who have a diplomas or diploma equivalent as their highest level of educational attainment earn $15,034 per year compared to $8,482 for those who do not (Ruggles et al., 2022). This gap becomes further compounded when considering industry certifications, various levels of collegiate degree attainment, and the generational impact on educational attainment in the United States. As stated previously, 24.9% of adults over the age of 25 without a high school diploma report being below the poverty threshold as opposed to four percent for individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

While simple statistics referring to the economic value of a high school diploma may be jarring for some, there is also information regarding how a diploma effects the economy long-term and generationally. In the United States, the employment rate for individuals aged 25 to 35 with a bachelor’s degree or higher is 87% compared to 57% for those without a high school diploma (Irwin et al., 2022). Furthermore, NCES discovered that when isolating females from the statistic, there is a 50% reduction gap from a bachelor’s degree and those without a high school diploma (2020). In the United States, fewer than 11% of available jobs do not require a high school diploma and that percent is
declining (Irwin & De La Rosa, 2022). In today’s current job market that translates to almost 90% of all available jobs being unobtainable for individuals without a credential. But this has a generational impact as well. Children of parents without high school diplomas have an increased chance of dropping out of high school and are 2.4 times more likely to face challenges related to poverty simply because a parental family member was unsuccessful in high school completion (Educational Data Initiative, 2019). The nature of educational attainment then becomes cyclical. While the statistic does not necessarily imply that an individual cannot earn a high school credential translating to an increased opportunity for sustainable employment, it does outline the generational earnings potential. When considering dropout rates in traditional high school settings, students that report coming from low-income families have higher dropout rates as opposed to those from high-income families (Rumberger, 1983). With a lower earnings potential, federal, state, and local governments not only receive fewer tax revenue from individuals without diplomas, they also generate on average over $250,000 per individual in assistance benefits (Belfield & Levin, 2007). If these individuals were to complete a diploma, this generates more than $45 billion in savings nationally from the government, that can be utilized to different capacities (Belfield & Levin, 2007). Belfield and Levin also discovered that high school dropouts have higher mortality rates, poorer health, are more likely to become incarcerated, and are more likely to require government assistance as outlined previously (2007).

At the center of these economic statistics is the high school diploma. Working backwards, if an individual earns a diploma, they have an increased chance to secure sustainable employment and access to healthcare, living longer. They will increase
earning potential reducing the need for government assistance and increasing the tax revenue for federal and state governments. Their children are then more likely to complete high school and earn a diploma themselves continuing the cyclical trend out of poverty and potential to sustainable employment earned through post-secondary certifications and education.

**Equivalency Disparity**

While there is evidence of an earnings gap between individuals without a high school credential (including equivalency pathways such as the General Education Development (GED) test or High School Equivalency Test or HiSET), there is also evidence of how an equivalency program is not as substantial as earning a high school diploma. The General Education Development (GED) provides a slight increase in earnings potential initially (up to $3-$6,000 annually) as opposed to having no high school credential at all, however, these alternate credentials do not provide the same economic benefit long-term as a high school diploma (Heckman et al., 2012). This limits options for those who are over the age limit of publicly funded high school education to a more restrictive earnings potential via test-based equivalency pathways such as the GED or HiSET.

According to the American Community Surveys (ACS), the GED exam has been represented by over 8 million US-born adults as being noted as their highest level of educational attainment (Ruggles et al., 2022). Traditionally, programs that have sought to address the educational and economic inequalities through high school equivalency have been limited to formats such as the GED because the state ceases to provide free education after a certain age (typically at age 22 or younger). The format for these GED
tests includes assessments on reading, writing, social studies, and math, and require a passing grade on each to earn a credential. Research shows the longer an individual is removed from a traditional high school setting, the lower they typically perform on the test (Brough et al., 2021). High schools who have students facing engagement issues, typically usher individuals to participate in the GED as they are not distantly removed from recent education and typically have a higher GED completion rate (Hackman et al., 2012). As individuals increase their time away from traditional education, they are more likely to experience diminishing success and opportunities with any educational program (Heckman et al., 2012). By the time an adult reaches their mid-late 30s, there is minimal change in educational attainment further solidifying the notion that the window for educational attainment closes significantly for late teenagers and almost completely after the age of 30 (Heckman et al., 2012).

The continual study of high school diplomas when compared to a GED illustrate how when compared to existing studies, the return on investment (ROI) is higher when analyzing costs of both high school diplomas over GED programs. Simply put, the labor market return for a GED is smaller than a diploma. While the GED requires a lower financial investment in students, it does not address all of the skills and social abilities a high school does and that translates to an increase in earnings potential of less than 10% of that of a high school diploma holder (Brough et al., 2021; Heckman et al., 2012; Jespen et al., 2016; Murane et al., 2000). Why then has the GED been the primary source of credential outside a high school diploma? Workforce development programs, criminal justice programs, and public assistance tend to usher individuals to GED testing because it is relatively quick, relies solely on an exam, and is inexpensive in comparison to
secondary educational platforms (Brough et al., 2021). If exiting traditional high school, or having aged-out of publicly funded secondary education is the narrative for millions of individuals annually across the United States, what then is a more productive option for adults seeking post-secondary education or sustainable employment?

**The Excel Center**

In September 2010, educational leaders and legislators in Indianapolis, Indiana developed a program to address the gap in education and poverty involving adults without a high school diploma. The program became known as The Excel Center (TEC). Since 2010, TEC has expanded to multiple states across the United States and for most schools, is considered a public charter high school for adults. The rationale behind it being a charter high school is that when an individual exits the public educational system prior to diploma acquisition, they also left behind funding allocated to them by federal educational funding (Brough et al., 2021). Essentially this means that by being a public charter school, the program is not asking for money that takes away from other programs, but for funding that was initially allocated for an individual’s success in a traditional high school system. The system revolves around one key aspect to ensure the success of its students, removal of educational barriers for adults.

The state government of Indiana recognized there was a growing population of individuals who were either dropping out of high school, or not having their educational needs met, and thusly reaching the age cap of 21 where public education was no longer offered. These individuals as stated previously were challenged with sustainable employment opportunities when lacking a high school credential. An adult high school without an age cap restriction seemed an appropriate response to address the need
originating in Indianapolis, however, a traditional format for education would need to be addressed.

School Format

For whatever reason an individual was unsuccessful in obtaining a diploma in a traditional setting, most adult learners would return to high school with different needs than teenagers. Whether caring for a family, adjusting hours of availability from work, or facing life events that would keep someone from attending, The Excel Center model focuses on a format that accommodates the adult learner including required the program at a national level to be conducted in-person (Brough et al., 2021). The balancing act that ensued asked the question, “how can we create a program that maintains the rigor of a traditional high school, but is accelerated for adults, and has a flexible format for individuals with limited time on any given day.”

In Indiana and the other Excel Centers across the nation, the program is held to the same state requirement for credit acquisition to attain a diploma. That means the same 40 credits required in Indiana, 24 in Missouri and the District of Columbia, 22 in Arizona and Tennessee, still need to be obtained to issue a diploma (Brough et al., 2021). It is pertinent to address that each Excel Center school must also meet state requirements for credit attainment set by the state whether that be seat time (length of instruction), competencies (core benchmarks for student comprehension), assessment performance, or a combination of the three. For example, unlike Excel Centers in other locations, the Excel Center program in Arizona must follow the state required seat time rule and cannot base credit acquisition on competencies alone. Arizona has a seat time requirement for credit acquisition causing the rate of credits awarded for core classes at the Excel Center
(math, science, language arts, social studies) to be awarded at a rate of .5 credits for 4000 minutes of instruction (10 weeks). In contrast, a competency-based state can offer the same classes at a rate of one full credit for as little as 2,400 minutes of instruction (eight weeks). It is requirements such as these that illustrate the individual nature of each state’s educational program, and how school formats vary across the Excel Center national program.

The first way the program can perform at an accelerated rate is to issue credits to students that have already been earned at a previous secondary education institution. Data showed most incoming adults have previously acquired some amount of high school education and therefore would not need to start at zero credits (Brough et al., 2021). For example, if individuals stopped attending high school their junior year, they would be able to transfer all earned credits to The Excel Center and pick up where they left off regarding credit attainment. To further expedite the process, the length of a traditional semester, or “term”, was shortened from an average of 16 weeks to eight or 10 (Cole, 2022). Each state that an Excel Center currently operates in has different rules and regulations regarding length of terms, course hours, educational benchmarks, and competencies to maintain course rigor; however, by shortening the length of each term, the schools can include four or five terms each school calendar year as opposed to two in a traditional school setting. To honor a process that is accelerated, the program across the nation does operate “year-round” with varying levels of instructional time off at every location averaging about eight to ten weeks throughout the year. Considering the population of adult students, the program serves (non-mandatory attendance requirement), lengthy down time from education (such as a three-month long summer
break) can become a barrier to attendance as life outside of school can present itself with new challenges and student skills can begin to decline when not being consistently engaged.

The school calendar adjustment being one of first format changes in the Excel Center program, paved the way for specific course changes. As the program operates “at-will” (non-mandatory attendance requirement), creating flexible course offerings in a collegiate format was the next format change to be implemented. Most students did not have the availability to take courses throughout the entire school day. Whether employment, parental duties, or reliance on others for transportation, the program offers multiple course offerings throughout the day to customize a schedule tailored to each student’s scheduling and academic needs. For example, a parent that works a nightshift, has school-aged children, and must rely on a significant other for transportation to and from school, may only be able to attend classes from 9 in the morning to 2 in the afternoon. The student would have the opportunity to take courses needed to graduate offered by instructors during this time frame.

To ensure success and availability, each school determines how often courses need to be offered throughout the day each term to ensure there are little to no “gaps” in a student’s schedule. This becomes more challenging as a student is closer to graduation because the courses needed become specific. Each school must then take into consideration which courses to offer and when, so students are always left with options during their available time. If students close to graduation need a required English Language Arts class (ELA), the school will need to ensure that the course is offered both in the morning and afternoon, so the students could take the required class during a time
they are available. Some Excel Center schools enlist evening courses as well to supplement extra classes, and to accommodate those students who only have availability in the evenings (FAQ, 2020). Like many collegiate settings, this format allows students to tailor a custom course schedule based on their credit attainment needs and availability.

The Excel Center recognizes that not everyone returning to education as an adult has fond memories or context surrounding secondary education. For that very reason, the school format is unique in that it operates as an adult oriented establishment both cosmetically and with unique staffing structure. A key staple to adult success is empowerment and each school is designed to foster those feelings of independence and reducing reliance on support structures when transitioning from student-hood to careers (Support services, 2022). Every classroom is designed and outfitted to have the look and feel of a professional setting without the traditional rows of individual desks and chairs. Most Excel centers have low and high-top tables placed in conference style positions to encourage group-style learning practices and collaboration often employed in collegiate or workplace settings. The staff and administration even have unique titles straying from the term “counselor” and “principal” and opt for titles as “life coach,” “college and career readiness specialist,” and “school director.” Adjusting titles is another way The Excel Center can pivot from traditional school settings providing students with a unique adult education experience.

Lastly, the curriculum itself is adjusted to meet the needs of the adult learner. While each state/territory that currently houses an Excel Center has different guidelines for what is required to obtain a high school diploma, utilizing curriculum and pedagogy built and designed for adolescents and teenagers will not generate the same results for
adults. Research by Patterson and Mellard (2007) revealed that increased time spent by instructional staff with adult learners resulted in better adult learner outcomes. Intentional support decisions that emphasize learners themselves, trained staff, quality of support services, and convenient location of learning opportunities garnered positive learner outcomes. The foundational concepts for andragogical theory (adult learning) articulated by Knowles (1975) remain worthy of attention today. Knowles stated that adults have a psychological need to be self-directing, drawing from their own experiences for learning, and that their motivation to learn comes from a concern to immediately apply the knowledge.

Utilizing these principles of andragogy, The Excel Center program focuses on three aspects of education to ensure success for its students. First, the rigor of the curriculum is comparable to a traditional high school setting. This ensures that a graduate from an Excel Center school will have the same content knowledge and exposure to content as a traditional high school graduate would have. Secondly, Excel Centers focus on relevance of materials offered during instruction. Adults viewing educational materials as being relevant to their life post-graduation supports Knowles (1975) notion that the information will not only be retained but increase buy-in and participation during instruction. Lastly, Excel Centers focus on the relationships made during the educational experience for students. Mellard et al., (2007) stressed the importance of relationships with adults and the correlation to knowledge retention and support systems for effective adult education to occur. The Excel Center program encourages students to build relationships with staff and other students to enhance their educational experience and assist in removing barriers and overcoming challenges they may face. As determined by
the national level for the program, the schools still use their state’s guidelines for qualified instructors who hold the certifications and qualifications to perform their duties as in a traditional high school format.

**Barrier Removal**

At the heart of The Excel Center program, and what makes the program unique when compared to other educational programs, is the concept of barrier removal. It is one thing to include educational barrier removal to an existing program; however, The Excel Center built its education around removing barriers for adults to return to education. Despite every Excel Center school having its own unique culture and populations of students served, some common offerings across all schools in the program include free tuition, free access to childcare, and free access to industry certifications and training.

The commonality between adults and adolescents is the presence of obstacles; however, adults may face different challenges and barriers than adolescents. Research by Patterson and Paulson (2016) showed that those who most need support for further learning—the least educated and poorest—have access to the fewest resources. According to Patterson and Paulson (2016) the primary barrier to learning is cost. Importantly, if an adult learner is willing to learn, they are still affected by the gap that exists between those with wealth to spend on education and those who do not have financial freedom. Trying to raise a family and needing to work increased hours to provide for their family may cause an adult student to cease their education and thus creates a barrier for participation. There is no constitutional law requiring adults to attend school as there are for children. Adult education programs are attended by choice and students may leave at will. For these reasons, The Excel Center program established itself
as a completely free program removing the barrier of financial hardship to its students. Most Excel Center schools across the United States are public charter high schools, meaning they receive funding based on requirements set forth by each state/territory the schools operate in to ensure the program can remain free of charge to its students.

So how does barrier removal look in an adult high school program? First, the program utilizes life coaches as opposed to traditional school counselors. Each student is assigned a life coach upon entry to an Excel Center creating up to a 1:100 life coach to student ratio. These individuals not only create schedules but serve as a confidant and mentor to the students frequently meeting with students to address barriers and challenges faces both on and off campus (FAQ, 2020). These may include domestic violence, abuse, housing, nutrition, hygiene, anxiety, employment, and countless others related to poverty and financial hardship. These life coaches build relationships and partnerships with organizations outside The Excel Center so when students come to them needing assistance with a barrier, they are connected to services best fit for said need. For example, if a student has struggled with attendance due to a domestic dispute, is without income, and now has no place to reside, their life coach may connect the student with a hotline for domestic dispute assistance, as well as income and housing assistance programs. By focusing on barriers that would typically prevent an adult to continue education, life coaches essentially increase the chances a student will successfully graduate and empower them to gain financial freedom and overcome barriers on their own. This logic leans heavily on a Goodwill theme where they “offer a hand-up not a hand-out” by educating individuals on how to seek assistance and then gain independence from it (MDRC.org, 2022).
The next barrier removal aspect of The Excel Center focuses around on-campus provisions. Each Excel Center is either equipped with an on-site childcare or partnering childcare to provide free care and education to students’ children. With the nationally mandated minimum wage in 2022 being $7.25 per hour, many adults without a diploma cannot afford to work and pay for childcare as the expenses associated with childcare are greater than the income earned from work (Minimum Wage, 2022). By offering childcare, students can spend time in school without the expense of childcare allowing them to earn a diploma and industry certification that translates to increased wages/salary upon graduation. Each Excel Center creates pathways to free industry certifications for students that may not be focused on attending college but prefer to enter an “in-demand” workforce with a credential and certification earning them a substantial wage. These industry certifications such as pharmacy tech, medical billing and coding, Comp Tia A+, heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC), and many others often cost several thousands of dollars and are provided to students free of charge. While the return on investment (ROI) of these programs would more than pay for the cost of the certification based on employment, students may not be in a financial position to invest in them on an individual basis. For example, ziprecruiter.com lists the national average salary of an HVAC technician as $62,000, yet the national average cost of the program is $4,864. (neit.edu, 2022; ziprecruiter.com, 2022). Therefore, The Excel Center offers no-cost avenues to certifications, so students have one less financial barrier to attain a certificate to increase their chances of sustainable employment post-graduation.
Missouri Excel Centers

In 2018, Missouri opened its first three Excel Center schools with its fourth opening in 2019 and its fifth and sixth in 2023. Similar to the national Excel Center model, Missouri based its program around free education, barrier removal, and career pathways as mentioned previously. What is unique to the Missouri model is the avenue the program is funded. Missouri Excel Center schools are categorized as private high schools unlike the other Excel Center schools across the nation that are public charter high schools. Also, as of this writing, a study has yet to be conducted solely on the Missouri Excel Centers despite the LEO of Notre Dame conducting research on the national Excel Center model primarily involving the schools located in Indiana.

Missouri Excel Center funding stems from multiple sources. First, the Missouri legislature granted monies from the general revenue fund based on H.B. 680 outcomes in Missouri (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4). Secondly, charitable contributions from both MERS Goodwill (Missouri) and other organizations generate monies to be utilized for the school. This is not unique to the national Excel Center model/program; however, the Goodwill branch that operates each Excel Center elects how much money to fund each program based on decisions made through the governing board of each Goodwill division. Finally, what make Missouri unique is the funding provided from Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) monies. To secure those monies, every student that attends the Excel Center schools in Missouri completes an income assessment form every term/semester. This form indicates which economic assistance program each student qualifies for and therefore earns reimbursement or funding based on the student’s location on the federal
poverty guideline. These two programs have investment in the Excel Center program because on average, a single adult with two children who is receiving SNAP or TANF benefits will use more than $20,000 dollars each in benefits in a single year (Lee, 2021). By funding students in the Excel Center program, SNAP and TANF will see a decrease in overall annual funding as graduates begin to earn more money through increased wages and employment as a direct result of diploma and certification attainment. At the inception of the Excel Center program in Missouri, Goodwill negotiated $1,650 per credit hour from SNAP. This translates to $39,600 awarded to fund the Missouri Excel Center program if a student comes in needing all 24 required credits to graduate.

Because the Missouri schools are considered private school institutions, the program sought accreditation to not only validate the program for the public eye, but for legislation as well. Accreditation offered to a school by an accrediting institution means that the school follows educational standards acknowledged nationally (Basics of School Accreditation, 2022). The Missouri Excel Center schools earned accreditation in 2020 (BT Communications, 2020). Now that the schools are accredited, it would be pertinent to conduct a study on the Excel Center program in Missouri to further explore the impact of a program that relies on various funding streams. This research will serve the purpose of giving voice to the graduates of the program, have the potential to validate the program further than accreditation alone, and inform stakeholders of the research that has yet to be conducted in Missouri since the schools opened.

**From Research to Implementation**

This research study and impact analysis on the Excel Center program can inform decision-making stakeholders to evaluate implementation strategies if so desired. To
begin, an impact analysis has yet to be conducted on the Missouri Excel Center program. By completing said analysis, primary stakeholders such as the district’s superintendent or CEO for MERS Goodwill will be presented with a study representing the impact the program has had on its students since opening schools in 2018. This allows stakeholders to analyze whether they believe the program is having a greater than, less than, or on target performance regarding student impact compared to past or present goals. This study offers insight to areas of the program that may require further research to be conducted or provide opportunity for growth in areas determined by program leadership. There is also the possibility that the research supports the efforts made by the program to the extent that leadership will choose to operate in a similar manner as 2018 with little to no change implemented. Regardless of what direction leadership for the Missouri Excel Center program takes, the research could only benefit the program as organizations are not always offered the opportunity for an impact analysis to be conducted before a program is no longer sustainable or beneficial to those it serves.
SECTION THREE: SCHOLARLY CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY
Introduction to Prior Research

While the Excel Center program has existed over a decade, there has yet to be conducted an impact evaluation, specifically on the students and in Missouri. However, there has been research conducted on similar adult secondary education test-based programs, and research conducted on the outcome measures for the Excel Center nationally, as well as the methods used for conducting a student impact analysis. The following section will elaborate and shed insight on these previously conducted research studies to inform decision making processes for this research study. Starting with research on the function, composition, and execution of the impact analysis itself, the study itemizes components of the logic model (inputs, outputs, and outcomes) as it pertains to the Excel Center. As most data and studies for adult secondary education revolve around equivalency programs, research and data will be presented on why these programs have been the primary choice, and what makes those programs differ from the Excel Center program. This will serve to inform the reader what research exists, and why research on the Excel Center has value to its stakeholders and future enrollees.

From Enrollment to Outcomes

If an individual were to understand the meaning of the term “impact,” they could simply perform an internet search to find a definition that outlines and lays foundation to this research. Merriam-Webster (2023) outlines the definition of impact as, “the force of impression on one thing on another: a significant or major effect.” Utilizing the context and scope of the research, impact then refers to the force or impression of the Excel Center program in Missouri on participants in the program, specifically those that have completed it. Therefore, by tracing back from the definition of “impact”, the goal of
understanding what impact means as it pertains to the Missouri Excel Center program requires understanding the outline of how participants arrive at a place where impact can be measured. This understanding will be comprised of what the program does to generate impact compared to other existing programs, where participants and stakeholders exist prior to involvement in the program, and the direction said impact takes individuals and the program itself into the future.

**Using Logic**

In section one of this research study, a logic model illustrated the input, activities, and outcomes of the Missouri Excel Center adult high school program. To observe and discover what outcomes stem from participation and completion of the program, the logic model illustrates the pathway students take. These outcomes will be directly linked to individuals after enrollment and exposure/utilization of services and supports offered. At its core, the logic model intentionally serves the purpose to expose a perspective that could be extended to any educational program in that program is designed to implement some form of transformation through knowledge transfer to elevate an individual’s personal growth or potential for said growth.
Analyzing the logic model (Fig. 2) requires interpretation of three individual pieces. First, inputs are recognized as what specifically is being put into the adult high school impact logic model that is identified as being measured by the different stages. In other words, the inputs are the source materials expected to experience change (Newcomer et al., 2015). Activities, secondly, is the catalyst that creates change or impact. In this instance, it refers to the program services offered specifically to Missouri adult high schools to incite change in the inputs, or students. Finally, the outcomes measure the effectiveness of the activities on the inputs. In this study, that translates to the measurement of student achievement after implementation of services have been rendered. This measurement should generate data and response to the study to illustrate the effectiveness of the activities.

Compare this study to one of enrolling in a gym for physical improvement; for example, individuals who enroll in a gym membership seeking to improve their physique can be considered inputs. The gym equipment and training and routines can be seen as the supplied activities/resources. The outcomes would be the measurement of growth as
opposed to not participating in the program. If looking at a gym membership study, readers would view the outcomes measured in muscle gain or weight loss compared to the credited activities implemented such as time in the gym, equipment used, and growth from entry to membership to time of measurement. If the study showed that of participants studied, those who did not partake in the membership saw little to no growth in weight loss or muscle attainment and those who did exhibited a percentage of weight loss and muscle attainment, the data suggests that participation was the catalyst for change in physique. Applying that analogy to adult high schools, this study serves to discover what benefits enrollment in Missouri adult high school programs has on growth and development of students as opposed to not enrolling all together. Further research may be used to discover benefits of adult high school programs over other alternatives (such as online education or GED programs) in similar fashion to what specific gyms have different outcomes over other methods of improving physique such as in-home routines or dieting to levy the effectiveness of a gym program.

**Inputs**

The first portion of the adult high school impact logic model revolves around *inputs*, in this case reference to the students that enroll in the program. Newcomer et al., (2015) suggested that the inputs refer to the primary subject(s) being measured in a logic model that will exhibit change. As stated previously in multiple sections of this research study, students that enroll in Missouri’s adult high school program, or Missouri Excel Centers are over 21 years of age and lack a high school diploma. There are many reasons an individual would find themselves fitting the qualifications for entry into The Excel
Center program, so what types of individuals find themselves in a position for enrollment?

A study performed by Doll et al., (2013) indicates that there are many reasons why a student exits a traditional high school. Doll et al. illustrated there are three categories of unsuccessful diploma attainment (2013). These categories are fall, push, and pull. The study that was conducted asked individuals for reasons they were unsuccessful in diploma attainment and reported percentages based on all reasons selected (the nature of the study contributes to certain percentages totaling more than 100 as multiple reasons were selected.)

“Fall” describes individuals who are disengaged, or otherwise “forgotten” that for whatever reason are unsuccessful in diploma attainment because a need is not being met. These can be related to a change in schools (11%), do not like school (37%), or (20%) did not feel a sense of belonging (Doll et al., 2013). Individuals in this category comprise of 14.3% of total “drop-outs” in a traditional high school setting. “Pull” on the other hand, refers to those individuals who were influenced by external occurrences to cease traditional high school education totaling 36% of total dropouts. These may consist of those who felt it was easier to obtain a GED (40%), became pregnant (28%), had to support family (20%), had to care for a family member (15%), or (14.4%) became a mother/father to a newborn (Doll et al., 2013). The largest percentage however were students in the “push” category who were pushed out of secondary education. Comprising of over 48% of total dropouts, missing too many days (43%), failing grades (38%), and failure to get along with teachers (25%) rank among the top of the list (Doll et al., 2013). There is not one isolated reason a student is unsuccessful in completing their
high school diploma, nor is there an isolated “type” of person that enrolls in an Excel Center. These statistics highlight an array of reasons any student could find themselves no longer attending high school.

Students and applicants for The Excel Centers across the United States are primarily driven by two factors, employment and the value of a diplomas as opposed to the GED (Brough et al., 2021). Survey data supplied by the Lab for Economic Opportunities (LEO) suggested that whilst students and applicants still face barriers to obtaining a high school diploma as an adult, the program itself appeals to these individuals because of the promise of services and barrier removal (Brough et al., 2021). To elaborate, students and applicants, as noted previously, face three primary reasons for not continuing a high school education. They are either pushed out, pulled out, or fall out. These individuals may face challenges for several years before the gap between themselves and those who obtained a high school diploma become significant enough that a catalyst for change is sought after. It is known that individuals who obtain a high school diploma have more opportunities for employment available to them with increased wages and potential benefits (Heckman et al. 2011). For example, if person “A” obtains a diploma in a traditional school however person “B” does not, person “A” may face opportunities to employment in the years to come that are unobtainable to person “B.” Person “B” may enter the workforce to earn a decreased wage to support whatever situation that caused the individual to cease education. 10 years later, person “A” may have obtained skills through different trainings, employment, formal education and hold a career that is substantial enough to support a family. Whereas person “B” lacks the credential of a formal high school education, has only previous work experience to seek
future employment, and now has a barrier to enter the workforce for careers that require a diploma. While not uncommon, this is only an example of a situation that would cause an individual to seek adult high school education or equivalence.

Understanding why an individual would be driven to entry in an Excel Center program gives clarity to understanding the data behind enrollment. The average age of an Excel Center student is 31 across the nation (excelcenter.org, 2022). This illustrates there is over a 10-year average gap between when students may potentially exit a traditional high school before seeking enrollment in The Excel Center. Fry illustrated that the income gap that exists in the United States increases as individuals age, therefore motivation behind earning a diploma increases as time passes (2014). This may be the reason why the average age at an Excel Center school is 31, because individuals have spent enough time outside of a high school education to recognize the increasing gap in earned wages as they age, but still feel there is time to change their potential for employment moving forward. While this instance has yet to be studied, it could explain why there has been an increase in adult high school education equivalency programs since 2011 (Brough et al., 2021).

Activities

The second part of the logic model references “activities” or the catalyst for change on “inputs.” In this study, that refers to the tools used in barrier removal, supplied services, and education provided for students. This is the primary foundation for study as the activities are what separates The Excel Center from other existing alternate diploma acquisition programs. Conducting a program evaluation specifically on the Missouri Excel Center program will illustrate the similarities and differences between the program
versus similar options. While this particular study does not ask students about the perceived benefits provided by the “activities,” future research could determine the perceived value of each activity allowing the Excel Center program to maximize impact of provided services and resources. The primary activities that The Excel Center focuses on are adult oriented curriculum, barrier removal, and supplied services.

**Curriculum**

As the average age of enrolled students is 31, students typically have spent several years outside an educational institution. This means that a traditional curriculum may not be as effective when students have spent several years with deteriorating academic skillsets. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) supported this concept by illustrating that as individuals age, their ability changes and curriculum must be adjusted to reflect age (2022). To further illustrate a common alternative to diploma acquisition, the GED, NCES also published that individuals successful in passing the GED test are primarily between 19-24 years of age and the success rate diminishes over age 24 (2022). The format of the GED involves a comprehensive test, so the logic behind an adapted curriculum tailored for adults is what separates The Excel Center apart from a curriculum perspective.

Curriculum is designed around competencies of a traditional high school, with the key difference being the relevance of materials that make sense for adults. The entrance assessments also play a key role in administering curriculum. If students enter the program after having spent time away from a classroom environment, they will likely need to see education in practice with “real world” scenarios that apply to them at the level of educational ability they enter the program with. However, if they come into the
program at below high school level English or math proficiency, the program is tailored to skill students into high school level proficiency before core credit attainment so that their diploma will have the same weight and relevancy as a traditional school. The inverse of this structure would be solely to offer classes based on previous transcripts. If a student needs an Algebra II credit for example but has not been in a math class in over a decade, they may likely find themselves unsuccessful if they test in at a sub-8th grade math level without re-enforcing their math competencies prior to taking the course. Studies show that after age 24, math proficiency skills degrade, and as such, The Excel Center focuses on improvement of skills in application that is relevant to the learner to enhance knowledge retention (easymathsskills.com, 2022).

The Excel Center curriculum offers core content courses for elective credit for students that are not yet at the competency level of high school courses (FAQ, 2020). This concept was developed to ensure students were still earning elective credits for their courses that were below high school level but ensures that students have a pathway to grow and develop their skills to be successful in a high school core content course. Research conducted by LEO illustrates that approximately 95% of enrolled students will test in needing at least one “remedial” course (below high school level) in either math or English (2021). This translates to only one student out of every 20 that enroll that places in at having competency to earn both high school level math and English credits. Knowing students need at least one form of pre-high school level course offerings to develop their skills, may help explain why students are less successful in completing programs like the GED as they age because they need more assistance in developing their abilities in those fields (ETS.org, 2020).
**Barrier Removal**

The other primary activities or support services that make The Excel Center program unique are barrier removal services. The services and supports can take many forms as adult students face obstacles to educational attainment across a wide spectrum of barriers. When previously introducing both the Missouri Excel Center program and the other Excel Centers across the country, it was illustrated that some of these barriers may include, but are not limited to access to childcare, transportation, poverty, and educational ability. How can these barriers impact a student’s opportunity for success and what impact can barrier removal services influence a student’s path to graduation?

A study conducted by University of Missouri doctoral candidates illustrated the impact and perceived value on support services offered specifically to students in the Springfield, Missouri Excel Center school. The study involved only a small sample of Excel Center students compared to those enrolled across the country; however, it shed insight on challenges students may face on a larger scale. The specific focus included barriers to enrollment in the Springfield Excel Center with the aim to identify areas of focus the program should allocate resources to increase effective barrier removal. Findings from the 2020 research study on barriers to enrollment in the Springfield Excel Center illustrated that prior to enrollment, the main barriers faced by students primarily consisted of five main categories: work obstacles, family obstacles, time, transportation, and commitment/confidence/motivation (Cole et al., 2020). It is also worth noting that 62.5% of the 162 respondents felt that prior to enrollment, they viewed their academic ability as being “weak” or “very weak” (Cole et al., 2020). While studying barriers to enrollment can provide insight to program expansion, the study was unable to survey the
potential students that never made it to enrollment due to barriers faced. A byproduct of the research conducted in 2020 was uncovering what barrier removal tools were identified by students as being the most important to them for attending. As the current research focuses on student impact, the scope of previous studies shifts to current services and barrier removal. The students who participated in the 2020 study were asked what they perceived as being the most important services offered by the Springfield Excel Center. The responses indicated that the most essential services were support systems such as access to life coaches (Cole et al., 2020). Other essential services included access to internet, flexible scheduling, free tuition, and access to free on-site childcare. Therefore, to summarize the relevant findings of the 2020 study over barriers to enrollment for the Springfield Excel Center, the services that were deemed most essential revolved around removing financial requirements and access to support systems such as life coaches.

Financial barriers for adults returning to school can manifest itself in many ways. In the example of The Excel Center program, the most prevalent barriers to attending school include childcare costs, transportation, and tuition. These primary costs would otherwise not be incurred by students if they were not enrolled in a traditional educational program. Every Excel Center school across the United States offers access to free childcare, most of which are housed on site in the school location. Students have reported they are no longer forced to sacrifice expenses related to childcare so that they may attend school. This means for roughly 30-40% of Excel Center students who have children needing childcare can avoid expenses by utilizing the childcare center provided by the school (TheExcelCenter.org, 2021). Aside from childcare, another identified
expense involves transportation. The Excel Centers across the country all state they provide transportation assistance to remove the barrier of added expenses to education. Transportation needs vary geographically across the Excel Center network. Depending on available public transit systems, Excel Centers may invest more heavily on bus passes to provide students that report needing assistance with transportation and do not have access to a reliable vehicle. Other centers may invest more heavily in gas cards, especially if located in more rural areas that do not have easy access to public transit.

Many studies that involve adult education identify the largest barrier to continuing education as being the cost of tuition (Brough et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2020; Patterson, 2018). The Excel Center program recognizes this and therefore are all completely tuition free. This means that compared to programs that require a form of financial cost, The Excel Center has no barrier to entry revolving around monetary expenditure from students. This barrier removal tool is especially pertinent when the majority of populations served are unable to spend personal finances on education (Brough et al., 2021). Of the barriers removed for students located at the Springfield Excel Center, students reported the financial barrier removal as being in their top five necessary for enrollment (Cole et al., 2020).

While there exists a large spectrum of barriers preventing adults to obtain a high school diploma, the goal of the Excel Center is to minimize the influence of these barriers on students’ education. From barriers addressed by the curriculum and educational layout to those that require referral of services, each student has a unique path to graduation and that includes a unique system of barriers to overcome.


**Services Rendered**

The third portion relating to “activities” in the logic model for the study relates to services provided by The Excel Center. The Excel Center program revolves around barrier removal; however, there are other services rendered that may not necessarily be considered barrier removal but instead as support services to assist students in becoming successful in academia and ultimately graduation. The Excel Center model accomplishes this by providing quality instruction using the modified curriculum mentioned previously, providing access to life coaches who assist with barrier removal tools and academic supports, and providing services to earning certifications or college placement via a college and career readiness specialist.

A life coach can be defined as an individual who offers guidance on how to be successful in life’s endeavors. In this instance, that includes seeking services for students that may have individual barriers more specific than transportation, tuition, and access to childcare. As studied in 2020, Cole et al. noted that almost 40% of active students surveyed stated their number one identified essential resource or service provided was the support system provided by team members. (Outweighing access to computers, flexible scheduling, cost of tuition, and on-site childcare.) Life coaches are often individuals with social work or school counseling experience that spend time with students who have varying degrees of needed supports. For instance, if a students are experiencing physical or emotional trauma and abuse, homelessness, substance abuse, extreme poverty, and countless others, life coaches have a network of resources to refer students to so they can obtain the assistance they need. While the goal could be considered barrier removal, the act itself is a provided service. Often students have stated they know there are services in
existence, yet they do not know where to begin obtaining them. As each student has
different needs, this research study will gain insight as to just how critical the services
provided from life coaches were to aiding in graduate success.

Graduation may be viewed by students as the ultimate milestone in their high
school education; however, the Excel Center program views this as only the first
milestone. Every school in the network employs either a College and Career Readiness
Specialist (CCR) or allocates a Lead Life Coach to track progress and assist with placing
students into industry certification programs or college placement. Workforce
development is a large portion of what comprises the outcome measures are for Excel
Center schools. As such, a diploma itself is not the difference maker in a career, it is the
catalyst for opportunities previously unavailable to students without diplomas.
Approximately one in four students will seek post-secondary education across the Excel
Center network, with over 80% having earned an industry certification (excelcenter.org,
2021). The process to achieving those statistics involves a CCR offering services of
career exploration, potential job placement, industry certification coursework, and
collegiate placement. Returning to high school can be daunting enough to prospective
students, let alone the uncertainty of the unknown in post-secondary successes.
Therefore, Excel Center CCRs build pathways in a similar manner as a life coach would
with barrier removal, but instead with emphasis on careers and higher education. In
Missouri, all students are required to attend a senior seminar course (often led by the
CCR), that explores career pathways and collegiate opportunities for students. As
students in the Missouri Excel Centers are all over the age of 21, the research on how
impactful the services provided by a CCR will also shed insight on how effective and
relevant college and career exploration is to adults as opposed to teens in a traditional high school setting.

**Outcomes**

The logic model utilized for conducting research on student impact on the Missouri Excel Center program is completed by focusing on outcomes. This translates to student achievement in education, employment, and personal development. In a traditional sense, outcomes can be presented in numerical quantitative formats outlining what the Excel Center is able to assist students in accomplishing. However, how this translates to program impact on students and their lived experiences may differ greatly. As discussed in an earlier section, much of the funding for the Excel Center program relies on legislative outcomes and goals set by each partnering Goodwill and their state. Yet the narrative for metric outcomes is only the beginning to understanding the true student impact of the program and its services relative to achievement in education, employment, and personal development.

Educational outcomes are most easily measured by looking at diploma attainment or discovering what percentage of graduates go on to higher education. However, these metrics do not easily show what educational competency students are coming into the Excel Center program with. Research nationally on the Excel Center program show that approximately 60 to 70 percent of enrolled students would otherwise qualify for an individualized education plan (IEP) or qualify for exceptional student services (ESS or SPED) had they been enrolled in a traditional public-school setting where these services are required by law to be made available to individuals (LEO, 2021). A graduate may state they came into the program and assessed at a fifth-grade reading level and a third-
grade mathematics comprehension and within a year or two, was able to master competencies and graduate with the same set of skills a traditional teenage high school student would. This possible impact then carries over to life skills not measured by outcome metrics when performing basic math or reading on a day-to-day basis.

Regarding employment, an incoming adult student may be employed as a server at a restaurant earning a wage equivalent to $45,000 annually. However, after earning a diploma and a certification as a phlebotomist, earns now $50,000 annually. Metrics may show that the base impact of the Excel Center program saw the graduate earn an increase of about 10%; however, it does not include how the graduate has access to obtain careers offering larger salaries over the course of time. It does not include that the graduate works more consistent hours and is able to spend time with their family or become involved in their children’s education. It also does not illustrate the impact of receiving medical, retirement, or vacation benefits previously unobtained by employment.

Lastly, when discussing personal development, there is not a current metric used to measure and report on a graduate’s personal growth. This could take the shape of punctuality, people skills, civic responsibilities, and newly discovered world views. This outcome measure can only be discovered by asking graduates how the program has impacted their personal development, or how the program has changed them or as a byproduct, their families, because of participation and ultimately graduation. A student may say they learned the importance of punctuality, how to advocate for themselves, personal financial management, grief management, and self-worth, to name a few, as a direct result of participating and having graduated from the program. These qualities of personal development are not currently measured or tracked tie in with the usage of
Social Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL is utilized by instructors, coaches, and team members at Excel Centers across the country as it pertains to the growth and development of students outside traditional curricula. Stevens (2021) stated that students who received SEL supports reported they felt better equipped for life’s challenges both on and off campus allowing them to overcome stress, grief, and depression. For the Excel Centers, many students face such challenges, and their personal development will be considered an outcome measure included in the logic model to discover the perceived value as told by graduates.

**Exam Based Programs**

While the Excel Center program is unique, it is not the first high school or high school equivalent (HSE) program in existence. As stated in previous sections, there are opportunities for adults to continue or begin their HSE journey through opportunities such as the General Education Development (GED), High School Equivalency Test (HiSET), and the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC). These differ from diploma-based programs like the Excel Center as they primarily revolve around a single exam that assesses high school equivalent knowledge and comprehension. However, each pathway to HSE has its own barriers for success and appeals to different audiences as the “one size fits all” form of education in a traditional high school setting was for whatever reason unsuccessful for the adults in HSE programs. As the TASC is not recognized or offered in the state of Missouri, and is only offered in 15 states, the following information will revolve around the GED and HiSET (Accredited Schools Online, 2022).
General Education Development (GED) Program

For a variety of different reasons, individuals who seek non-traditional diploma acquisition methods may be most familiar with the General Education Development program or GED. The GED is considered a High School Equivalency (HSE) that informs institutions and hiring agencies that the individual has an equivalent high school education. The premise behind programs like the GED is to take a comprehensive exam that consists of a variety of subject matter illustrating that an individual who graduated in the traditional manner in high school has the same knowledge base and proficiency as an individual who successfully passes the GED. These subject matters include mathematical reasoning, reasoning through language arts, social studies, and science (GED, 2021). A passing score on the GED requires a passing score on each of the four portions of the exam, in other words, an individual cannot pass the GED if they are unsuccessful in passing just one of the four subject matters (GED, 2020). Utilizing a maximum score of 200, ged.com states that in each category, a score of 145 is considered passing, while a score of 165-175 is considered “college ready” and 175-200 means that an individual is not only considered “college ready” but also may have demonstrated skills that could qualify for up to 10 college credits (2020). The scoring of the GED allows for individuals to understand their proficiency and how it translates from a post-secondary education perspective. In theory, an individual with aspirations to attend college via GED pathways would identify whether they currently possess the knowledge set to be successful from a competency standpoint.

To sign up or enroll in taking the GED exam, (while the specific age varies slightly from state to state) an individual must not be enrolled in public education and be
of emancipated age or commonly 18 in most states. In the state of Missouri, however, that age is 17. According to bestgedclasses.org, (2022):

To earn a Missouri Certificate of High School Equivalence, a person must be a resident of Missouri (with a Missouri mailing address) and meet one (1) of the following requirements:

1. Be seventeen (17) years of age or older;
2. Be currently enrolled in school and qualify as a participant in an approved Missouri Option Program for at-risk youth;
3. Be withdrawn from school, have successfully completed sixteen (16) units of credit toward high school graduation, and have written confirmation of course completion from the superintendent of schools where the most recent high school graduation credits were earned; or
4. If home-schooled, have met the requirements of section 167.031, RSMo, for course instruction, and have written permission of the parent or legal guardian.

This information illustrates that while the GED is an alternate HSE, it is not intended for individuals to acquire at an earlier age if a student exhibits advanced knowledge (such as a 14-year-old who could take and pass the exam.) The requirements infer that the HSE option in Missouri is designed for individuals who may face barriers or complications to obtaining a diploma in a traditional manner and is viewed as an alternate pathway as opposed to a preferred one.

What are the financial costs for the GED? The costs for taking the GED are broken down per subject matter. If an individual is successful in passing one or more of the portions of the test but not others, this flexibility allows for an individual to re-take a
selected subject to replace a non-passing score. The prices range from state to state; however, the average cost is around 35 to 45 dollars per subject or 120 dollars for the complete exam (GED, 2023). Depending on how a person performs on the test, they could spend approximately 100 dollars for completing the test provided they pass the first time. It is also worth noting that the exam itself may not be the only cost incurred. Many GED programs offer practice materials, courses, and texts to assist in preparation for exam taking and those expenses would be in addition to the exam. These costs would then be dependent on an examinee’s current academic understanding of the four subject matters with those needing more assistance being charged more to supplement completion of the GED exam.

**High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) Program**

The High School Equivalency Test (HiSET) is another form of an HSE measurement adopted by 23 states nationwide including Missouri (The HiSET Exam, 2022). In January of 2014, the HiSET replaced the GED as an HSE in the state of Missouri (OTC, 2022). It is similar in execution to the GED with a few outlined differences. According to bestgedclasses.org, the HiSET includes paper portions of the test as opposed to being strictly computer based, consists of five subject matters as language arts are broken down into both reading and writing, costs 55-95 dollars on average, and requires a score of eight out of 20 in all subject matters with a 45 overall score minimum (2023).

Of the 23 states that offer the HiSET, nine, including Missouri, do not offer the GED. The HiSET was chosen by states as an option due to being developed by the non-profit organization Education Testing Service (ETS) that minimized financial costs
incurred with the exam testing (ETS, 2023). This test was purchased by PSI services, a workforce development provider with official acquisition and change occurring in the fall of 2022 (PSI, 2023). While similar in nature to the GED, the HiSET functions differently in the manner it is graded and the requirements for passing. For example, the HiSET requires a passing score of at least two on the written essay portion of the exam where the essay is included in the language arts reasoning portion of the GED exam. When considering barriers for successful completion, the HiSET is similar to the GED regarding preparation course offerings and proficiency. While the scoring is different, the evidence is inconclusive as to which test is more “difficult” with some stating the mathematics portion being less rigorous on the HiSET (bestgedclasses.org, 2023). While the upfront cost of the HiSET is less expensive than the GED, there are supplemental courses and materials available to increase performance on the exam often with additional costs incurred.

**High School Equivalency (HSE) Versus Diploma**

The GED and similarly HiSET programs are the two most administered HSE options, with 816,000 individuals taking the GED (pass rate of 75%) and over 47,000 taking the HiSET (57% pass rate) every year (NCES, 2021). However, there are reasons for individuals to research and determine which program best suits their needs. The two primary pathways to adult secondary education are diploma acquisition and HSE (as seen in figure 3). The diploma pathway includes traditional high school, online platforms, and adult high schools like the Excel Center program (Gory, 2022). The HSE pathway includes the previously mentioned GED, HiSET, and TASC tests. Both lead to a high
school credential, but there are differences why an individual would select to participate in one over another.

*Fig. 3 Depiction of Gory’s (Paths to a High Schools credential)*

![Diagram of 2 Paths To a High Schools Credential](image)

*Note. The depiction is from “Ged statistics-how popular is the GED test in 50 States.” by S. Gory, 2022. (https://bestgedclasses.org/ged-statistics/) Copyright Best GED Classes.*

**Value & Availability**

The primary reason for individuals to seek a high school diploma is the perceived and realized value of a diploma versus an HSE. While diminishing if a student’s pathway leads to post-secondary education, if the highest level of education is a diploma as opposed to an HSE, the returns diminish. To elaborate, once an individual completes a
collegiate degree, or an industry certification, institutions and organizations are rarely concerned about the previous educational credential leading up to a certification or degree (Gregory, 2022). Many careers ask what an individual’s highest level of education is, and this supplants either a diploma or HSE. However, if an individual does not engage in post-secondary education or certification acquisition, there are times where organizations will take preference to a diploma.

Several recruiting and job posting sites notice that applicants that solely hold an HSE have a lower hiring rate compared to diploma holders. This is contributed to employers viewing an HSE as a pathway a person seeks when facing significant life barriers or struggles with goal completion (Indeed, 2023a). Employers may not state the reason for not being accepted into employment is solely based on HSE acquisition versus a diploma, especially as it can be perceived as discrimination and contradictory to the equal employment opportunity act (US EEOC, 2023). However, discrimination does exist and if available, individuals may prefer to seek diploma pathways to avoid the risk of discrimination from potential employers. This can be illustrated by exploring the tiered system for enlistment in the United States Armed Forces. The military has three different tiers for applicants based on educational acquisition and scores on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Test (ASVAB). Tier one is reserved primarily for diploma holders, tier two for those with an HSE, and tier three for individuals without either (PRHD, 2002). In tandem with ASVAB scores (higher scores on the ASVAB can elevate an individual into a higher tier disregarding educational attainment), an applicant’s final “tier” standing includes educational attainment and is allowed into military employment if the percentage of acceptance is within the allotted amount. For example, the Air Force
allows 1% of new enlistments to be classified as tier two, 5% for the Marines, and 10% for the Navy illustrating the importance of educational attainment when seeking a career in the armed forces (Powers, 2020; Indeed, 2023b).

In previous sections, it has been outlined why a student would seek an adult high school diploma from the Excel Center. To summarize, it is a no cost adult only program that specializes in barrier removal and offers classroom instruction with curriculum tailored to adults. However, programs such as the Excel Center does not currently exist in every state, nor does it currently utilize online education as a primary method of instruction. This means the geographical barrier still exists for adults seeking a high school diploma pathway.

Obtaining an HSE is more readily available than alternate pathways to a diploma across the United States. According to bestgedclasses.org, over 25,000 testing sites for the GED and HiSET exist in the United States (Gory, 2022). This means that no matter where an individual resides geographically, there should be opportunity to obtain an HSE with minimal geographical barriers. HSE is also traditionally available to a larger audience of non-diploma holders as the age requirements can be as low as 16 in some states (bestgedclasses.org, 2022). When considering the availability of an HSE program, there are currently advantages in the sheer number of sites offered for completing the exam. Perhaps this is due to the fact the GED has been implemented for 80 years and has been viewed by many as the one alternative to traditional high school (GED, 2023). However, despite the increased availability in HSE programs, a diploma from adult education can replace an HSE credential and thus individuals who wish to obtain a
diploma and pursue certifications or college education may wish to enroll in programs such as The Excel Center.

**Success & Outcomes**

Lastly, rounding out prior research on adult HSE programs is the focus on measurements of success and outcome measures. Sure, it could be said completion of an HSE program constitutes for success; however, as many programs receive state or federal funding, what measurements are truly used to be witness to success? As stated previously, many HSE programs are levied against what HSE translates to on a state and federal level. For example, the state of Missouri would be interested in funding a program to the tune of $5,000 per student if it illustrates successful completion of a program will generate an increase of $20,000 in tax revenues back to the state over the lifetime of a student and reduce dependency on government assistance saving $250,000-$500,000 over the lifetime of an individual, (using a basic return on investment metric). So how exactly are existing HSE programs measured for success?

Focusing specifically on Missouri’s HSE programs, (HiSET) and the Excel Center program, the outcome measures revolve around both completion and post “secondary” educational success. Research from the HiSET annual statistical report indicate that as students or enrollees grow and age, the success rates diminish (2020). ETS reported that in 2019, Missouri had an overall passing rate of 62.6% with individuals in the 16-18 age range passing at 66.5% to 60+ age ranges passing at a 29.6% rate (HiSET, 2020). As students age, their success rate drops consistently regarding the HiSET testing program. Bear in mind that the acquisition of HSE is not the final goal for individuals seeking a diploma or equivalent, the goal is to either enter post-secondary
education such as college or university education, or to enter the workforce with certifications or educational standing to increase wages throughout the lifespan of a student. Because options are limited for students lacking a high school diploma or HSE, acquisition is the first step toward changing the narrative for individuals seeking to improve their quality of life via employment potential.

With age being a factor in successful completion of testing based HSE programs like the HiSET, how then can traditional diploma acquisition aide adult students in not only acquiring the credential, but all the opportunities for employment that an HSE or diploma represents? According to the NCES, females without a diploma or HSE are 40% less employed than females with the credential and college education, where males have a reduction of 10-20% depending on whether they complete a college degree (2023). In addition, students that successfully pass the GED have a 35-40% post-secondary enrollment rate, compared to 65-70% for traditional high school graduates, and 5% go on to complete a bachelor’s degree compared to a Missouri State average of 32% holding a bachelor’s degree before age 25 (Camera, 2016; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2021).

There is not a simply way to measure success or outcomes for HSE programs of that of alternate secondary education. Of course, number of graduates, number of students that go into trade programs of post-secondary education, and persistence are all measures to help illustrate how effective a program is. However, to begin to understand how the student experience impacts individuals not only in the short term but over the course of time remains to explored as told by the students themselves. In previous sections, the notion of accountability for the Excel Center program as provided by
legislation in tandem with MERS Goodwill, will lay a foundation for an impact analysis to be conducted. The impacts as told by the program’s graduates will tell the story about how the program generated impact and to what extent that impact had on their lives.

**Summary of Literature**

To summarize the literature presented in this section of research, the Missouri Excel Centers will undergo an impact analysis study using a logic model that comprises of inputs, activities, and outcomes. The inputs for the Excel Center program are its students that enroll, the activities are the tools and services offered by the program, and the outcomes pertain to students perceived impacts on their lives as provided by the program. This type of logic model design has been proven to be effective in performing an impact analysis, that is: determining which activities had effects on inputs to drive outcomes. The Excel Center while subject to research, is also viewed in contrast to other alternative adult secondary education programs known as high school equivalency (HSE) programs. The options for adults currently in the United States are either diploma acquisition programs (such as the Excel Center) and test based HSE options (such as the HiSET and GED tests.) Each respective pathway offers unique differences and its own challenges for completion; however, statistical data does inform that the test based HSE programs are not as equitable or lucrative over time as earning a high school diploma. The economic gap over time is represented by high school diplomas having greater value in both salaried employment and monetary earnings, opportunity, and success rates in higher education programs, as well as the percentage of completion on programs depending on student age. The literature also points to the barriers that go unaddressed by many test-based programs including finances, scheduling, and educational competencies.
that cannot be easily replicated especially when significant time causes decay in quality of knowledge retention (reason why older students are less successful on test-based programs compared to those who are younger). Using literature as support for research, readers are able to identify what facets and qualities of the different programs would motivate different student stakeholders, and to what extent the Excel Center program generates impact with services offered to students.
SECTION FOUR: PRACTITIONER REPORT
PowerPoint Presentation and Executive Summary of Practitioner Report

The following is the practitioner report to be presented to stakeholders of the Missouri Excel Center program. This would be conducted in person or virtually. The format is designed in a manner that the Excel Center program can utilize in future meetings with annually updated data to reflect the most current findings. The design utilizes both PowerPoint format for visual representation of findings accompanied by an executive summary. The researcher would utilize both to present findings by the spring quarter 2024.
Purpose of Study

- Discover the impact the Missouri Excel Centers having on its students
- Add scholarly context to limited existing research
- Increase awareness, inform stakeholders

Research Framework

- Program theory (Program outcomes/achievement/Reasons)
- Impact theory (outcomes/ effect focused)
- Program (Impact) evaluation
- “The purpose of most impact evaluations is to isolate the effects of a program to help officials and citizens to decide whether the program should be continued, improved, or expanded to other areas” -Newcomer et al., 2018
Logic Model

INPUTS:
Students enroll and attend adult high school

ACTIVITIES:
The program supplies classes, childcare, and career exploration

OUTCOMES:
Student achievement in education, employment, and personal development

Research Design

- Quantitative data (H.B. 680/Outcome measures/student surveys)
- Setting, Participants
  - 4 Missouri Excel Center schools (2018-2022)
- Graduates only (limited, but quality sample) Survey
  - MERS Goodwill supplied archival data
  - Graduates from 4 Missouri Excel Schools
  - Pool of over 800 Graduates in Missouri
  - Sample Size (prior research experience)
Analysis

Goal:

- Since 2018 have Missouri Excel Centers achieved outcomes?
- Does self reported graduate data align with outcomes?
- What IMPACT has the program had on graduates lives?
  - Employment, generational education, higher education, assistance dependence, lived experience
- Who is benefitting from the program?

Missouri H.B. 680

- At least 50% of the school’s graduates will attain an industry certification or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation
- at least eighty-five percent of the school’s graduates who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training will be employed within six months of graduation
- the school’s graduates who enter the workforce shall have, on average, a wage rate at least twenty percent greater than the average Missouri wage rate for individuals without high school diplomas
Outcomes

- 60% graduate responses indicated earning an industry certification or enrolled in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation. (10% above Benchmark)
- Insufficient data to disaggregate employment for those not seeking certifications/higher education, however, 69% reported having found employment within 6 months.
- Wages in 2022 (most complete recent reporting) indicated 27% average increase over minimum wage, 23% higher than average Missourian with “less-than” high school diploma.

Program Impact Analysis

- Program is having impact on graduates’ lives
- 60% that earned industry certifications or enrolled in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation would not have otherwise had the opportunity
- 69% employment rate may be attractive to individuals without a diploma, especially when considering how many may be putting higher education over employment.
- Completion of the program is solely responsible for the 23% increase in average wage compared to non diploma holders.
Financial Benefit Analysis (ROI)

- 2019, 2020, 2021 program expenses = $18.5 Million
- 523 graduates from 2019-2021
- $262,500 remaining lifetime assistance per student based on average age of 35.3 years and average life expectancy of 75 in Missouri.
- If 71 of the 523 graduates eliminate government assistance, (13.5%) saves assistance $18.5 million/complete expense of the program (*NOTE does NOT include generational savings or increased tax revenue earnings.)
- If 13.5% eliminate dependence on assistance, ROI = 0% (returns $18.5 Million)
- If 27% eliminate dependence, ROI = 100% (returns $37 Million)
Analysis on Who Benefits?

- 81% Female
- Average age historically 35.3, or 37 in 2022
- In 2022, 58% of students are black/African American, 37% White, 4% Hispanic, and 2.5% multi-racial, and 1% Asian
- H.B. 680 outcomes indicate
  - Colleges/Certification programs for enrollment
  - Employment offices/Employers
  - State with tax revenues and reduced/elimination for assistance programs

Implications of Findings

- While determined “Impactful” more information needed to stay current. Trends established.
- Impact increases confidence, widen scope of trackable data to enhance development
  - MERS Goodwill to open 2 more schools in 2024 (8 in total)
  - National office aims to have opened over 40 schools by end of 2024
  - States without strong Goodwill could benefit from similar program
  - Stakeholders/educational policy change
  - State and/or federal funding assistance programs
Implications for Further Research

- Track employment data to illustrate ROI to expand or generate sustained/increased funding and program growth (Quantitative)
- Research graduates’/students’ lived experience to supplement outcome data (Qualitative)
- Research what graduates attribute their success to regarding program services to expand, restructure, or improve (Qualitative)

Questions, Comments, Concerns
Practitioner Report
Executive Summary
By Joseph Cole

Outcome Measures

Legislative Benchmark: (Missouri H.B. 680, 99th General Assembly)

- 50% of graduates will attain an industry certification (IRC) or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within 6 months of graduation
- 85% of graduates who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training will be employed within 6 months of graduation
- Graduates who enter the workforce shall have an average wage at least 20% greater than the average Missouri wage rate for individuals without high school diplomas

Reported Results/ Impact

Program is Impacting Students

- 60% attained IRC or enrolled in higher education within 6 mos. of graduation
- 69% Total graduates find employment within 6 months of graduation
- Graduates entering the workforce earn 27% over the state minimum or 23% more than individuals without high school diplomas

The Missouri Excel Center program is responsible for access to IRCs, post-secondary education availability, and increased wages opposed to non-diploma holders
Return On Investment

2019-2021 Total program expenses = $18.5 Million
2019-2021 total graduates = 523
Average graduate age = 35.3 years
$262,500 = Average gov. assistance remains aged 35.3 years
(based on Missouri Life expectancy of 75 years)

**IF** 17/523 graduates eliminate dependency
on government assistance (13.5%)
ROI = 0% for TOTAL program expense

Positive ROI Projections

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<th>2021</th>
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<tr>
<td># Needed to Eliminate Assistance</td>
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<td>241</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Who benefits?

Students are the Excel Center’s primary stakeholders
Missouri Excel Center District data (2021-2022)

- Asian 1%
- Black/African Am. 56.6%
- Hispanic 3.9%
- Mixed 2.4%
- White 36.1%

81% Female Enrollment

Average Age
37

Other Stakeholder Benefits

The Excel Center can identify and seek out various stakeholders as partners and future students.

H.B. 680 results indicate great potential interest/benefit to:

- Industry Certification programs
- College/Post secondary education via enrollment
- Employment offices/ various employers
- State assistance programs
- State Tax revenues
Implications

Missouri Excel Center program deemed “impactful”
More data collection and analysis required to stay current
Opportunity to widen scope of trackable data to enhance findings and outcome development

Further Research

- Track employment data to illustrate ROI to expand or generate sustained/increased funding and program growth (Quantitative)
- Research graduates’/students’ lived experience to supplement outcome data (Qualitative)
- Research what graduates attribute their success to regrading program services to expand, restructure, or improve (Qualitative)
SECTION FIVE: JOURNAL ARTICLE TO BE SUBMITTED TO

JOURNAL OF EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS PLACED AT RISK (JESPAR)
The Missouri Excel Center Program: An Evaluation of Adult High Schools


Spring 2024
About the Author

Joseph W. Cole is a doctoral candidate enrolled at the University of Missouri – Columbia. He is a former social studies educator who has spent the last six years in educational leadership including time as an assistant principal and an adult high school director. The following study was created to fulfill graduation requirements for the education leadership and policy analysis doctorate and derives from his dissertation. The researcher and committee members Dr. Cynthia MacGregor, Dr. Sandra Hutchinson, Dr. Tracey Glaessgen, and Dr. Jon Turner were not compensated for the study. Cole was given access to archival data by the MERS Goodwill organization and obtained data as an employee of MERS Goodwill serving as an Excel Center school director. He acknowledges that although he is a stakeholder in educational progress, he is not a stakeholder of employment or financial compensation and is presenting research without bias.

Abstract

In 2010, Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana opened its first Excel Center adult high schools aimed at assisting adults in obtaining a high school diploma and transitioning those adults into higher education, industry certifications, and the workforce completely tuition free. MERS Goodwill, the largest Missouri branch of Goodwill (excluding Kansas City and western portions of the state), opened its first schools in 2018 (The Excel Center, 2021). The purpose of this study is to conduct a program (impact) evaluation on the Missouri Excel Centers. The following study explores the background, history, and operations of the Missouri Excel Center program. The researcher utilized archival data as reported by graduates to determine what impacts the program has had.
and who is benefiting by using the Missouri House Bill 680 (99th general assembly) as a benchmark for analysis on outcomes.

The Missouri Excel Center program is generating an impact on its graduates via higher education and industry certifications, employment, and wages. The program serves a racially diverse student body who are primarily female with an average age of 37. The implications of the study include a recommendation that Missouri Excel Center program develop methods of tracking wages and government assistance to report the benefits. This includes reduced or eliminated dependency on government assistance programs, increased tax revenues earned by the state, and generational financial impact on families. Future research should use qualitative research to track data based on graduates’ lived experiences to identify aspects of the program that are generating the most impact attributing to graduate success.

Background

In the United States, approximately 12% of adults 18 and over do not have a high school diploma or diploma equivalent. In 2019 the U.S. Census Bureau published a report showing that out of 251,268,403 adult respondents, 30,337,897 have not received a diploma (United States Census Bureau, 2019). In the United States 2 million students drop out of high school every year (Fry, 2014). In addition, 24.9% of adults over the age of 25 without a high school diploma report being below the poverty threshold as opposed to four percent for individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2019). The poverty threshold is defined by annual household income of $25,701 for a family of four (ASPE, 2020). These statistics outline how the relationship between obtaining a high school education and higher education directly relate to a family’s
poverty status. While these statistics may not be shocking to some, these rates have only been increasing in the United States since the 1960s (Fry, 2014).

**The Excel Center Model**

In September 2010, educational leaders and legislators in Indianapolis, Indiana developed a program to address the gap in education and poverty involving adults without a high school diploma. The program became known as The Excel Center (TEC). Since 2010, TEC has expanded to multiple states across the United States and for most schools, is considered a public charter high school for adults. The rationale behind it being a charter high school is that when an individual exits the public educational system prior to diploma acquisition, they also left behind funding allocated to them by federal educational funding (Brough et al., 2021). The system revolves around one key aspect to ensure the success of its students, removal of educational barriers for adults.

**School Format**

For whatever reason an individual was unsuccessful in obtaining a diploma in a traditional setting, most adult learners would return to high school with different needs than teenagers. Whether caring for a family, adjusting hours of availability from work, or facing life events that would keep someone from attending, The Excel Center model focuses on a format that accommodates the adult learner including required the program at a national level to be conducted in-person (Brough et al., 2021). The balancing act that ensued asked the question, “how can we create a program that maintains the rigor of a traditional high school, but is accelerated for adults, and has a flexible format for individuals with limited time on any given day.”
In Indiana and the other Excel Centers across the nation, the program is held to the same state requirement for credit acquisition to diploma attainment. That means the same 40 credits required in Indiana, 24 in Missouri and the District of Columbia, 22 in Arizona and Tennessee, still need to be obtained to issue a diploma (Brough et al., 2021). It is pertinent to address that each Excel Center school must also meet state requirements for credit attainment set by the state whether that be seat time (length of instruction), competencies (core benchmarks for student comprehension), assessment performance, or a combination of the three. For example, unlike Excel Centers in other locations, the Excel Center program in Arizona must follow the state required seat time rule and cannot base credit acquisition on competencies alone. Arizona has a seat time requirement for credit acquisition causing the rate of credits awarded for core classes at the Excel Center (math, science, language arts, social studies) to be awarded at a rate of .5 credits for 4000 minutes of instruction (10 weeks) as opposed to a competency-based state that can offer the same classes at a rate of one full credit for as little as 2,400 minutes of instruction (eight weeks). It is requirements such as these that illustrate the individual nature of each state’s educational program, and how school formats vary across the Excel Center national program.

The first way the program can perform at an accelerated rate is to issue credits to students that have already been earned at a previous secondary education institution. Data showed most incoming adults have previously acquired some amount of high school education and therefore would not need to start at zero credits (Brough et al., 2021). For example, if individuals stopped attending high school their junior year, they would be able to transfer all earned credits to The Excel Center and pick up where they left off.
regarding credit attainment. To further expedite the process, the length of a traditional semester, or “term,” was shortened from an average of 16 weeks to eight or 10 (Cole, 2022). Each state that an Excel Center currently operates in has different rules and regulations regarding length of terms, course hours, educational benchmarks, and competencies to maintain course rigor; however; by shortening the length of each term, the schools can include four or five terms each school calendar year as opposed to two in a traditional school setting. To honor a process that is accelerated, the program across the nation does operate “year-round” with varying levels of instructional time off at every location averaging about eight to ten weeks throughout the year. Considering the population of adult students, the program serves (non-mandatory attendance requirement), lengthy down time from education (such as a three-month long summer break) can become a barrier to attendance as life outside of school can present itself with new challenges and student skills can begin to decline when not being consistently engaged.

The school calendar adjustment, being one of the first format changes in the Excel Center program, paved the way for specific course changes. As the program operates “at-will” (non-mandatory attendance requirement), creating flexible course offerings in a collegiate format was the next format change to be implemented. Most students did not have the availability to take courses throughout the entire school day. Whether employment, parental duties, or reliance on others for transportation, the program offers multiple course offerings throughout the day to customize a schedule tailored to each student’s scheduling and academic needs. For example, a parent that works a nightshift, has school-aged children, and must rely on a significant other for transportation to and
from school, may only be able to attend classes from 9 in the morning to 2 in the afternoon. The student would have the opportunity to take courses needed to graduate offered by instructors during this time frame.

To ensure success and availability, each school determines how often courses need to be offered throughout the day each term to ensure there are little to no “gaps” in a student’s schedule. This becomes more challenging as a student is closer to graduation because the courses needed become specific. Each school must then take into consideration which courses to offer and when, so students are always left with options during their available time. If students close to graduation need a required English Language Arts class (ELA), the school will need to ensure that the course is offered both in the morning and afternoon, so the students could take the required class during a time they are available. Some Excel Center schools enlist evening courses as well to supplement extra classes, and to accommodate those students who only have availability in the evenings (FAQ, 2020). Like many collegiate settings, this format allows students to tailor a custom course schedule based on their credit attainment needs and availability.

The Excel Center recognizes that not everyone returning to education as an adult has fond memories or context surrounding secondary education. For that very reason, the school format is unique in that it operates as an adult oriented establishment both cosmetically and with unique staffing structure. A key staple to adult success is empowerment and each school is designed to foster those feelings of independence and reducing reliance on support structures when transitioning from student-hood to careers (Support services, 2022). Every classroom is designed and outfitted to have the look and feel of a professional setting without the traditional rows of individual desks and chairs.
Most Excel centers have low and high-top tables placed in conference style positions to encourage group-style learning practices and collaboration often employed in collegiate or workplace settings. The staff and administration even have unique titles straying from the term “counselor” and “principal” and opt for titles as “life coach,” “college and career readiness specialist,” and “school director.” Adjusting titles is another way The Excel Center can pivot from traditional school settings providing students with a unique adult education experience.

Lastly, the curriculum itself is adjusted to meet the needs of the adult learner. While each state/territory that currently houses an Excel Center has different guidelines for what is required to obtain a high school diploma, utilizing curriculum and pedagogy built and designed for adolescents and teenagers will not generate the same results for adults. Research by Mellard et al., (2007) revealed that increased time spent by instructional staff with adult learners resulted in better adult learner outcomes. Intentional support decisions that emphasize learners themselves, trained staff, quality of support services, and convenient location of learning opportunities garnered positive learner outcomes. The foundational concepts for andragogical theory (adult learning) articulated by Knowles (1975) remain worthy of attention today. Knowles stated that adults have a psychological need to be self-directing, drawing from their own experiences for learning, and that their motivation to learn comes from a concern to immediately apply the knowledge.

Utilizing these principles of andragogy, The Excel Center program focuses on three aspects of education to ensure success for its students. First, the rigor of the curriculum is comparable to a traditional high school setting. This ensures that a graduate
from an Excel Center school will have the same content knowledge and exposure to content as a traditional high school graduate would have. Secondly, Excel Centers focus on relevance of materials offered during instruction. Adults viewing educational materials as being relevant to their life post-graduation supports Knowles (1975) notion that the information will not only be retained but increase buy-in and participation during instruction. Lastly, Excel Centers focus on the relationships made during the educational experience for students. Mellard et al., (2007) stressed the importance of relationships with adults and the correlation to knowledge retention and support systems for effective adult education to occur. The Excel Center program encourages students to build relationships with staff and other students to enhance their educational experience and assist in removing barriers and overcoming challenges they may face. As determined by the national level for the program, the schools still use their state’s guidelines for qualified instructors who hold the certifications and qualifications to perform their duties as in a traditional high school format.

**Barrier Removal**

At the heart of The Excel Center program, and what makes the program unique when compared to other educational programs, is the concept of barrier removal. It is one thing to include educational barrier removal to an existing program; however, The Excel Center built its education around removing barriers for adults to return to education. Despite every Excel Center school having its own unique culture and populations of students served, some common offerings across all schools in the program include free tuition, free access to childcare, and free access to industry certifications and training.
The commonality between adults and adolescents is the presence of obstacles; however, adults may face different challenges and barriers than adolescents. Research by Patterson and Paulson (2016) showed that those who most need support for further learning—the least educated and poorest—have access to the fewest resources. According to Patterson and Paulson (2016) the primary barrier to learning is cost. Importantly, if an adult learner is willing to learn, they are still affected by the gap that exists between those with wealth to spend on education and those who do not have financial freedom. Trying to raise a family and needing to work increased hours to provide for their family may cause an adult student to cease their education and thus creates a barrier for participation. There is no constitutional law requiring adults to attend school as there are for children. Adult education programs are attended by choice and students may leave at will. For these reasons, The Excel Center program established itself as a completely free program removing the barrier of financial hardship to its students. Most Excel Center schools across the United States are public charter high schools, meaning they receive funding based on requirements set forth by each state/territory the schools operate in to ensure the program can remain free of charge to its students.

So how does barrier removal look in an adult high school program? First, the program utilizes life coaches as opposed to traditional school counselors. Each student is assigned a life coach upon entry to an Excel Center creating up to a 1:100 life coach to student ratio. These individuals not only create schedules but serve as a confidant and mentor to the students frequently meeting with students to address barriers and challenges faces both on and off campus (FAQ, 2020). These may include domestic violence, abuse, housing, nutrition, hygiene, anxiety, employment, and countless others related to poverty.
and financial hardship. These life coaches build relationships and partnerships with organizations outside The Excel Center so when students come to them needing assistance with a barrier, they are connected to services best fit for said need. For example, if a student has struggled with attendance due to a domestic dispute, is without income, and now has no place to reside, their life coach may connect the student with a hotline for domestic dispute assistance, as well as income and housing assistance programs. By focusing on barriers that would typically prevent an adult to continue education, life coaches essentially increase the chances a student will successfully graduate and empower them to gain financial freedom and overcome barriers on their own. This logic leans heavily on a Goodwill theme where they “offer a hand-up not a hand-out” by educating individuals on how to seek assistance and then gain independence from it (MDRC.org, 2022).

The next barrier removal aspect of The Excel Center focuses around on-campus provisions. Each Excel Center is either equipped with an on-site childcare or partnering childcare to provide free care and education to students’ children. With the nationally mandated minimum wage in 2022 being $7.25 per hour, many adults without a diploma cannot afford to work and pay for childcare as the expenses associated with childcare are greater than the income earned from work (Minimum Wage, 2022). By offering childcare, students can spend time in school without the expense of childcare allowing them to earn a diploma and industry certification that translates to increased wages/salary upon graduation. Each Excel Center creates pathways to free industry certifications for students that may not be focused on attending college but prefer to enter an “in-demand” workforce with a credential and certification earning them a substantial wage. These
industry certifications such as pharmacy tech, medical billing and coding, Comp Tia A+, heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC), and many others often cost several thousands of dollars and are provided to students free of charge. While the return on investment (ROI) of these programs would more than pay for the cost of the certification based on employment, students may not be in a financial position to invest in them on an individual basis. For example, ziprecruiter.com lists the national average salary of an HVAC technician as $62,000, yet the national average cost of the program is $4,864. (neit.edu, 2022; ziprecruiter.com, 2022). Therefore, The Excel Center offers no-cost avenues to certifications, so students have one less financial barrier to attain a certificate to increase their chances of sustainable employment post-graduation.

**Missouri Excel Centers**

In 2018, Missouri opened its first three Excel Center schools with its fourth opening in 2019 and its fifth and sixth in 2023. Similar to the national Excel Center model, Missouri based its program around free education, barrier removal, and career pathways as mentioned previously. What is unique to the Missouri model is the avenue the program is funded. Missouri Excel Center schools are categorized as private high schools unlike the other Excel Center schools across the nation that are public charter high schools. Also, as of this writing, a study has yet to be conducted solely on the Missouri Excel Centers despite the LEO of Notre Dame conducting research on the national Excel Center model primarily involving the schools located in Indiana.

Missouri Excel Center funding stems from multiple sources. First, the Missouri legislature granted monies from the general revenue fund based on H.B. 680 outcomes in Missouri (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4). Secondly, charitable contributions from both MERS
Goodwill (Missouri) and other organizations generate monies to be utilized for the school. This is not unique to the national Excel Center model/program; however, the Goodwill branch that operates each Excel Center elects how much money to fund each program based on decisions made through the governing board of each Goodwill division. Finally, what make Missouri unique is the funding provided from Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) monies. To secure those monies, every student that attends the Excel Center schools in Missouri completes an income assessment form every term/semester. This form indicates which economic assistance program each student qualifies for and therefore earns reimbursement or funding based on the student’s location on the federal poverty guideline. These two programs have investment in the Excel Center program because on average, a single adult with two children who is receiving SNAP or TANF benefits will use more than $20,000 dollars each in benefits in a single year (Lee, 2021). By funding students in the Excel Center program, SNAP and TANF will see a decrease in overall annual funding as graduates begin to earn more money through increased wages and employment as a direct result of diploma and certification attainment. At the inception of the Excel Center program in Missouri, Goodwill negotiated $1,650 per credit hour from SNAP. This translates to $39,600 awarded to fund the Missouri Excel Center program if a student comes in needing all 24 required credits to graduate.

Goodwill Industries International (Goodwill) is an organization dedicated to providing employment opportunities for individuals in need. Widely known for their retail stores that feature donated goods and merchandise, Goodwill also operates career centers and offers training and career placement services. In 2010, Goodwill of Central
and Southern Indiana opened its first Excel Center adult high schools aimed at assisting adults in obtaining a high school diploma and transitioning those adults into higher education, industry certifications, and the workforce. In addition, all the offered services are completely free of charge. After thousands of students graduated from Excel Center schools in Indiana, MERS Goodwill, the Missouri branch of Goodwill, determined there was a need for the Excel Center program and opened its first schools in 2018 (GEI, 2021). Missouri currently has over 500,000 adults over the age of 21 without a high school diploma which translates to a median income gap of over $10,000 annually compared to individuals who have either obtained a diploma or high school equivalent (Capital One, 2023). This was the initial premise for selecting it as a state to open Excel Center schools.

The Excel Center national program spans across six states, the District of Columbia, and consists of 33 adult high schools with plans to open more. The national program oversees the schools originally opened in Indiana and assists other divisions of Goodwill across the country to ensure successful launches of Excel Centers. An operation of this magnitude that has plans for expansion is not without its challenges and drawbacks. Each division of Goodwill that currently operates an Excel Center school is funded differently by both state and private monies raised from the organization and retail locations. They are also bound by each state’s individual requirements for diploma acquisition, as well as outcome measures tied to any public/state funding. For the Excel Center schools to be deemed beneficial and begin to start changing the employment narrative for those adults without diplomas, they must first prove to be effective, efficient, and a worthwhile investment for state funding.
One measure of success for an adult high school program is the issuance of diplomas. However, for all the Excel Center schools, there are outcome measures related to the mission of Goodwill. Through adult high schools, a diploma is merely the first step to changing the impact on graduates’ lives. Utilizing organizational partnerships and venues for higher education and professional certifications, the program’s final goal includes outcomes of equitable, sustainable, and improved employment. The mission statement of the Missouri Excel Center program is the same as MERS Goodwill: “changing lives through the power of work” (MERS Goodwill, 2020, “About the Excel Center” section). This concept defines the notion of gainful employment in that consistent, equitable work translates to a decrease in poverty for individuals.

When determining the significance of a study, it may be asked why this research matters. With over 10% of the adult population not currently holding high school diplomas in the United States, and of that percent over 24% reporting being below the federal poverty threshold, there are many who stand to benefit from adult high school programs (US Census, 2019). With approximately 2 million more “dropping-out” of high school each year, creating beneficial programs to change these individuals’ lives seek to not only change the standard of living, but prevent the gap produced by generational poverty and education. There may come a day when the educational system changes these numbers; however, by starting this change on the adult spectrum, this affords opportunity at an increased chance of success to the children currently engaged in the educational system. This study will immediately assist the Missouri Excel Centers to enhance performance. Once the research is complete and the student impact has been explored, other invested stakeholders can determine practice to expand the program on a
larger scale and begin to reverse national statistics. As current literature is relatively limited around adult high schools, this research could shed valuable insight to the program and its effectiveness in reaching its goals.

Materials and Methods

The research incorporates multiple segments pertaining to conducting an impact evaluation on the Missouri Excel Center program. The following includes research questions, the setting of the study, the conceptual frameworks utilized, data sources and methods of analysis. Together they illustrate the materials and methods that comprise the research and determine findings. To begin, the researcher focused on two research questions to drive the study.

Research Questions

The primary research question seeks to explore the impact of adult high schools on its students. What impact is the Missouri Excel Center program having on students? Research will be broken down into two parts to further elaborate on how the term “impact” is defined. First, as defined by the Missouri legislature in conjunction with MERS Goodwill, what outcome goals has the current program achieved since opening in 2018? Specifically, analyzing what graduates have reported within six months of graduation.

The second research question will be answered after analysis of outcomes and data as reported by graduates has been completed. Who has benefitted from attending The Missouri Excel Center program? By analyzing the outcomes and data, the researcher will be able to present findings on any reported changes, benefits, and impact the
program has had so future stakeholders and students may be informed. To summarize the two research questions:

1. What impact is the Missouri Excel Center program having on students?
2. Who has benefitted from completion of the Missouri Excel Center program?

**Setting**

The setting for primary data collection will be the four Missouri Excel Center schools operating in the cities of Columbia, Poplar Bluff, Saint Louis, and Springfield. (In 2023, there have been two more Excel Center school openings in Missouri; however, at the time of this writing, there have yet to be students to have acquired the credits to have graduated or surveyed, and therefore will not be a part of this study.) While each center is considered an independent school, they collectively comprise the Missouri Excel Center District. This means that certain characteristics of each school follow a unified district standard, while allowing for unique settings and operations to be managed at an individual local level.

The demographic of each school varies in ethnic diversity and student population size. Saint Louis has the capacity to serve over 450 students any given term, Springfield and Columbia over 200, and Poplar Bluff more than 100. Because each school setting is also different, barriers faced by students will vary from school to school (MERS Goodwill, 2020, “About the Excel Center” section). Students attending a rural location such as Poplar Bluff may experience greater difficulty in attending courses in person due to travelling distance, whereas students attending urban locations such as Saint Louis may find housing or availability of food and resources to be greater barriers.
Conceptual Framework

The primary framework driving the research was program theory, described as the understanding of the process that connects programs to their desired outcomes, and the basis of why programs do what they do to reach those outcomes (Rossi et al., 2004). Impact theory will be the secondary framework and focuses on the evidenced impact a program generates beyond the value of the program itself (National Health Services, 2017). Both program and impact theory lay the foundation for the fundamentals behind conducting a program evaluation on the Missouri Excel Center program.

The primary research design is conducting and utilizing a program evaluation, more specifically an impact evaluation. This is achieved by obtaining and using quantitative outcome/archival data from the Missouri Excel Center schools and its students. A simple logic model was utilized as a guiding principle for research design. The model illustrates the inputs as students entering the program, the activities as services provided by the Excel Center program, and finally immediate outputs (measured within one year of graduation) students are achieving (Fig. 1).

Figure 1

Adult High School Impact Logic Model
When determining the impact of the Missouri Excel Center program, the program’s quantitative outcome measures serve as a baseline. These outcome measures are the same as outlined in the previously mentioned Missouri House Bill (H.B.) 680 (2017). Specifically, is the program achieving (a) “at least fifty percent of the school’s graduates will attain an industry certification or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation,” (b) “at least eighty-five percent of the school’s graduates who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training will be employed within six months of graduation”, and (c) “the school’s graduates who enter the workforce shall have, on average, a wage rate at least twenty percent greater than the average Missouri wage rate for individuals without high school diplomas” (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4)? Data is obtained continuously by MERS Goodwill starting at student enrollment through one year following graduation. This data was analyzed to determine whether the Excel Center program met its outcome goals and served as the quantitative foundation to measure impact.

**Data Sources**

The research included quantitative data and analysis, making it a quantitative study (Mertens, 2019). To properly determine what impact the Missouri Excel Center program has had on students requires more than reporting strictly numerical data sets. Because Mertens (2019) stated numerical and quantitative analysis would be left to less interpretation as opposed to qualitative research, the primary data collection design will revolve around previous and current quantitative data (archival data) obtained from the Missouri Excel Center schools. Then, by utilizing application and analysis, the researcher will identify what specifically the data collected can inform on the impact of the Missouri
Excel Center program on its graduates. The numerical data obtained would directly relate to the program’s outcome measures as outlined in Missouri legislation (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4).

- What percentage of graduates obtained industry certifications, enroll in higher education, or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation?
- What percentage of students who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training are employed within six months of graduation?
- What is the average wage rate for graduates that enter the workforce?

To answer these questions, the researcher accessed the Missouri Excel Center’s reporting data that has been collected since its opening in 2018. This information is collected by each school in the district and presented by Goodwill annually.

When discussing collecting evaluation data, Caffarella and Daffron (2013), highlighted optimal techniques for collecting data in planning programs and evaluation for adult learners. Included in these techniques are survey tools (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013). Additional data was obtained to discover how the Missouri Excel Center program has impacted a student’s life. As of this research study, the archival data from the proprietary surveys disseminated by MERS Goodwill have resulted in over 800 total responses from graduates from 2019 through 2022. This archival data will serve the basis for analysis on the impact the program has had on graduates.

Surveys

Surveys can obtain information reliably and efficiently if performed accurately (Newcomer et al., 2015). The surveys that are sent out to graduates ask participants to share their current educational, employment, and financial status after graduating from
the Excel Center. The survey did not ask graduates about what services offered through the Missouri Excel Center program contributed to their success. The rationale behind this logic is removing graduate speculation that may or may not prove fruitful to the program’s goals. In addition, the survey did not ask what graduates felt could have been offered to enhance their program experience. The rationale behind speculative reasoning also contributes to the omission of this line of reasoning. Fink (2017) pointed out that by not adhering to this format (omission of speculative questioning), participants engaged in the survey may be given false hope that may not or cannot be fulfilled. As stated previously this study focused on the measurable impact of the Missouri Excel Center program on students, not potential impact of the Excel Center on students.

The method of data collection for the surveys was digital, utilizing both SMS text via cellular devices and email. This method has been conducted since 2019 utilizing MERS Goodwill’s proprietary program “MyMERS” that compiles personal information of students to disseminate information on a larger scale. Participants were contacted using both their cellular phone numbers and their personal emails addresses they have either registered with prior to program enrollment or have updated post-graduation. (The Excel Center program requires outcome data to be collected via student communication for one year following graduation and therefore updates student contact information at graduation and periodically leading up to one year afterward.) This archival data was collected by MERS Goodwill quarterly and was shared with the researcher to analyze and determine significance through findings. This data was through May 2023 and includes graduate reporting from graduates of May 12th, 2023.
Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was used for complementarity or enhancement from quantitative sources (Mertens, 2019). This means that when compiling the data from measured outcomes as a direct result of the Missouri Excel Center program (employment post-graduation, wages, higher education, and earned professional certifications), responses from graduates included within a survey will provide depth and understanding to outcome data. The process for analysis consisted of multiple stages.

To address the primary research question asking what impact is being made by the Missouri Excel Center program, outcome data for the Missouri Excel Center Schools was compared against the program’s legislative goals (as outlined in H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4).

• What percentage of graduates obtained industry certifications, enroll in higher education, or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation?
• What percentage of students who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training are employed within six months of graduation?
• What is the average wage rate for graduates that enter the workforce?

First, the researcher presents outcome results and levy data against the Missouri House Bill (H.B.) 680 (2017) to determine performance as measured by the state and MERS Goodwill. Secondly, the findings were analyzed to determine what impact the program has had on students by self-reported graduate data obtained by surveys provided by MERS Goodwill. The measure for analysis consisted of whether the Missouri Excel Center program achieved the benchmarks as outlined in H.B. 680, and how those statistics can translate to program impact on its graduates. The impact based on
benchmark statistics was compared (if applicable) to non-diploma holding adults in Missouri to complete a comparison. Third, a financial benefit analysis determined if the Missouri Excel Center program can develop a measurable ROI, and what benchmark or qualification would present a positive (profitable) return. To do so requires analyzing the costs of a program and the financial return on investments from funding sources. Finally, analysis of who is benefitting from the Missouri Excel Center program is provided. To answer the question of who benefits, the researcher compared the results of the provided archival data and determine what benefit the program could be having on the state, the students enrolled, and future students. This portion also determined what stakeholders are benefitting from the program such as MERS Goodwill, taxpayers, educational programs, and potentially other organizations interested in adult high school education.

Results

During the first five years of operation (fall 2018-2023) the Missouri Excel Center program has grown to include six schools across the state. In partnership with MERS Goodwill, the researcher has obtained archival data sets outlining who is participating in the Excel Center program, to what capacity, and what is being reported by graduates regarding educational, financial, and employment outcomes. The following findings will be presented in three main components. First the researcher discusses performance outcomes as measured by Missouri House Bill 680. Secondly, an analysis of the impact of the program itself. Lastly, the results identified who benefitted from the program.

Performance/ Outcomes Analysis for Missouri House Bill 680

The first measure of performance for the Missouri Excel Center program lies within Missouri House Bill 680. This bill was developed and agreed upon by both MERS
Goodwill and the Missouri state legislature to serve as a guideline for continued and sustainable funding. While the metrics do not specifically imply that failure to achieve each or any benchmark will result in discontinued funding, performance based on the metrics can create a case for continued, increased, diminishing, or discontinuation of state funding. To illustrate, Missouri House Bill (H.B.) 680 (2017) outlines key guidelines for expected outcomes from adult high schools in Missouri. These include (a) “at least fifty percent of the school’s graduates will attain an industry certification or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation,” (b) “at least eighty-five percent of the school’s graduates who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training will be employed within six months of graduation”, and (c) “the school’s graduates who enter the workforce shall have, on average, a wage rate at least twenty percent greater than the average Missouri wage rate for individuals without high school diplomas” (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4).

**Industry Certifications/ Higher Education/ Advanced Skills**

The first metric observed is the obtainment of industry certifications, enrollment in higher education, or advanced skills training by students and graduates for the Missouri Excel Center program. As stated in previous sections, an industry certification increases the opportunity for sustainable employment and increased wages, therefore it is one of the cornerstones for performance measures. These industry recognized certifications (IRCs) have a wide range of variety. They could be represented as anything from a welding certification, certified nurse’s assistant (CNA), heating, ventilation, and cooling (HVAC), to business, accounting, customer service, and Microsoft Office certifications among countless others. H.B. 680 outlines obtainment within six months of
graduation from the program, and many certifications require a high school diploma to be administered a certification exam. Therefore, depending on the specific IRC, students may begin coursework prior to graduation then take the completion exam after satisfying the state requirement for a high school diploma.

The first Missouri Excl Center graduates completed as early as 2019. This accomplishment stemmed from the fact that students were able to transfer their previously earned credits into the program, cutting down the time needed to accumulate the required 24 credits in Missouri to earn a diploma. As personally experienced by the researcher’s employment with MERS Goodwill, the metrics and availability for IRCs were still being developed and therefore offered less opportunities for certification completion and tracking. Missouri H.B. 680 states “at least fifty percent of the school’s graduates will attain an industry certification or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation.” The surveys for graduates across the state of Missouri totaled 886 responses. In total, approximately 25-30% of graduates reported enrolling in certification programs of which 71% completed within six months of graduation (with the omission of 2019 as there were no self-reported IRC data). Therefore, 19% of graduates reported earning certifications within six months of graduation.

The next portion of the first Missouri house bill benchmark (fifty percent of the school’s graduates will attain an industry certification or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation) includes continued enrollment in a form of education and training. This refers to enrollment in colleges, or specialized skills training that is not necessarily tied to an IRC such as business
management programs, healthcare, or industrial training. Cumulatively, 494 of the 886 graduate responses stated they were enrolled or currently seeking higher education or advanced skills training while 250 reported they were not enrolled seeking collegiate degrees. An IRC also requires advanced skill training, and therefore can include graduate enrollment in the cumulative total. While several students overlapped IRC attainment, enrollment, and collegiate advancement, 34 additional students not enrolled in higher education earned an IRC placing self-reporting at 60% of graduates either having earned an IRC, enrolled in higher education, or skills training programs. This is 10% higher than the H.B. 680 benchmark of 50% for graduates of 2019 through May, 2023. The archival data did not include a separation of self-reported responses to include dual-enrollment courses offered by the Excel Center program. These courses allow a student to enroll in college classes earning credit while simultaneously earning high school credit toward diploma attainment.

To summarize, based solely on self-reported data from surveys as opposed to internal tracking, 528 total graduate responses (60%) can be categorized as having earned and IRC or enrolled in higher education or advanced skills training, surpassing the H.B. 680 benchmark of 50%, however, the data relied solely on graduate responses that may not reflect the actual accomplishments of 887 total graduate responses from 2019-2023.

Employment

The second guideline for outcome measures as outlined in H.B. 680 expects an 85% employment rate by graduates not currently seeking higher education or IRCs. This metric illustrates how earning a diploma without seeking higher education or certifications can offer job opportunities. The researcher acknowledges that there can be
inconsistencies for this reporting metric as it can be challenging to track a graduate’s employment as a graduate may move from one place of employment to the next. It is also pertinent to acknowledge that the reports do include March 2020 through the summer of 2021, where different locales in Missouri were restricted, shut-down, or otherwise less than operational due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

From 2019-2022, 69% of all Missouri Excel Center graduates did gain employment. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the largest percentage resulted from the class of 2020-21 who achieved 83% employment. Observing individual graduating classes, the district saw 43.9% employment within six months of graduation for the class of 2018-2019, 74.7% for 2019-2020, 83% for 2020-2021, and 69% for the class of 2021-2022. Levying the results against H.B. 680, the researcher was unable to disaggregate employment percentages specifically for students who were not enrolled in higher education or IRC programs and therefore cannot accurately report on the outcome measure. However, the total graduate employment rate is 69% including graduates who were actively participating in higher education and IRC programs.

In summation, the researcher did not have enough data to determine whether 85% of graduates who were not enrolled in higher education, advanced skilled training, or having earned and IRC. However, including all graduate responses, regardless of educational enrollment or certification attainment, 69% had reported finding employment.

Wages

The next data points require understanding exactly how much individuals are earning after graduation. Missouri house bill 680 has a benchmark for graduates that do
enter the workforce to earn a 20% increase over the average wage of adult-non diploma holders. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2022 the average hourly wage for individuals with “less-than” a high school diploma is $11.83 in Missouri. For a program to have impact, participants (in this case graduates) must illustrate change over non-participants.

The Missouri Excel Center district students’ reported average hourly wage in 2018-2019 was $11.27 and consistently rose to $15.29 by 2021-2022. This average hourly wage for graduates in 2021-2022 is approximately 27% higher than the minimum wage in 2022, (Galante, 2022). Furthermore, with an average wage of $11.83 earned by adults without diplomas, the Missouri Excel Center graduates have an average wage increase of 23% surpassing the H.B. 680 benchmark of 20%, (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

To summarize archival wage data as reported by graduates, in 2022 (the most recent complete annual reported data), graduates stated they earned an average of $15.29 hourly. This wage is 27% over the state minimum. When comparing to the state average compared to individuals with a “less-than” high school diploma ($11.77), graduates averaged a 23% total increase, surpassing house bill 680’s benchmark by 3%.

**Outcome Measure Summary**

The outcome data obtained does inform on components of H.B. 680 and expectations. Those include (a) “at least fifty percent of the school’s graduates will attain an industry certification or enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training within six months of graduation,” (b) “at least eighty-five percent of the school’s graduates who do not enroll in higher education or more advanced skills training will be
employed within six months of graduation”, and (c) “the school’s graduates who enter the workforce shall have, on average, a wage rate at least twenty percent greater than the average Missouri wage rate for individuals without high school diplomas” (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4). The researcher determined that regarding industry certifications, higher education, and advanced skills training, self-reporting graduate data illustrates surpassing the 50% benchmark with 60% achievement. He also determines that while the employment data is reported at 69%, it is inconclusive to determine outcome measures without establishing a formula or tracking methods to extrapolate individual’s employment who are not either enrolled in higher education or seeking or having obtained an IRC (as outlined in the house bill). The final data point regarding the house bill’s outcome measure revolves around graduate’s wages. When compared to both minimum wage and average wage of individuals with a “less-than” high school diploma in 2022, the Missouri Excel Center graduates earn 27% and 23% higher wages respectively. This indicates that the impact of the program does conclusively translate to surpassing the house bill benchmarks in enrollment/attainment in higher education, skills training, and certifications as well as increased wages.

**Program Impact Analysis**

The impact of the Missouri Excel Center program extends beyond H.B. 680. While true the metrics were utilized as a benchmark, there are multiple data points that can illustrate program impact on graduates. However, using the data from graduate reporting, the researcher has determined program impact based on the Missouri H.B. 680 benchmark.
The first impact is the reported 60% of graduates who have either earned a certification, are enrolled in higher education, or advanced skills training. These pathways would not have been available to graduates without the guidance or completion of the Missouri Excel center program. While limited pathways into certification programs may be available without a high school diploma, the Missouri Excel Centers pay for certifications for enrolled students. They also offer assistance with college applications and financial aid making post graduate enrollment in higher education more accessible.

The second measurable impact as it relates to H.B. 680 is the rate of employment as reported by graduates. While there was not enough reported data to determine the percentage of graduates employed that were not seeking higher education or IRCs (as outlined in H.B. 680), the total percentage of employment was 69% within six months of graduation for all graduating classes through 2022. The researcher would also note this includes individuals who are enrolled in higher education and may not be currently employed due to time constraints. This was evident with the students who were enrolled in the Excel Center program who elected to focus on school as opposed to employment (as experienced by the researcher’s own employment as school director for the Excel Center). As a stakeholder, potential or current student, the information that approximately 70% of graduates find employment within six months of graduation 23% higher than non-diploma holders may contribute to motivation for program completion.

The final measurable impact is the 27% increase of hourly wages over the state minimum. This wage increase is a representation of the first impact, (certification attainment, higher education enrollment, and skills training), with more equitable employment being attainable in addition to diploma acquisition. Diploma acquisition is
the first step for continued increased wages, while advanced skills acquired through certification programs and higher education continue to create opportunities for wage increase via employment. To further illustrate the impact of the Missouri Excel Center program, the average wage of graduates within six months of program completion is reported at 23% higher than the state average of individuals with a “less-than” high school diploma educational attainment. This would mean completion of the program is the sole variable in increasing the average wages earned by almost 1/4th over individuals who have not completed high school.

Financial Benefit Analysis

While the initial findings regarding outcome measures was conclusive to sufficiently measure program impact in at least two-thirds of its benchmarks, the results can inform stakeholders of the program’s impact on its graduates. Utilizing the archival data provided by MERS Goodwill, the researcher can combine statistics to analyze financial benefit. This section will focus on expenses, projections, and what the researcher determines to indicate program impact.

Funding/Return on investment (ROI)

Perhaps one of the first metrics financial stakeholders utilize is the cost of a program over its outcomes. Return on investment (ROI) illustrates what is being put into a program and what returns are being achieved based on the financial investment. The formula would be represented as: net return divided by cost of investment = ROI %. If a state funded program costs one million dollars but saves the state 1.5 million dollars in the subsequent year, the ROI would be 500,000 dollars or 66.6% To understand ROI for the Missouri Excel Center program, one must look at total costs provided by state
funding and compare that to how the state benefits from successful completion of the program.

The data provided from the Missouri Excel Centers opening in 2018 through May of 2021 indicate there have been 523 total graduates. Program costs totaled almost 3 million dollars in 2019, 7.3 million in 2020, and 8.2 in 2021. While MERS Goodwill does fund the program through its own resources, the state dollars come from sources of money tied to government assistance programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (often referred to as “food stamps” or SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). On average throughout 2019-2023, approximately 80% of enrolled students have historically qualified for SNAP or TANF translating to being below 130% (SNAP) and 185% (TANF) federal poverty level. To be impactful, the program using money allocate to assistance programs must then reduce dependency of assistance from graduates to be profitable to the state. The data set provided to the researcher illustrates the average student age to be 35.3 years old historically, with the average increasing as of 2022 to 37 years of age.

The average government assistance for a lifetime in a household was $250,000 and can be as much as $500,000 currently or $20,000 annually for a single parent two child household (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Lee, 2021). Because the average life expectancy in Missouri is 75 years of age, the average student (35.3 years of age) has 39.7 years left on average to receive government assistance and has utilized 17.3 years of assistance since turning 18 (Life Expectancy, 2022). Using the average projections of $250,000 to $500,000 in total lifetime assistance awarded ($375,000) as the conservative medium for a household annually, this equates to 70% of their remaining life dependent
on assistance programs to the amount of $262,500 (or 13 years for a single parent two child household). Therefore, it would require 70.4 graduates to no longer need assistance to generate the 18.5 million that had been spent in total on the program from 2018-2021. If 70.4 graduates no longer require government assistance, the program will have replaced its entire expenses with its ROI totaling 0% from 2018-2021. This would mean if government assistance programs completely funded the Missouri Excel Center program, it would earn a return equal to the entire cost of the program.

Based on earnings and reported data, the Missouri Excel Center program can be deemed impactful from an ROI perspective by generating increased wages (which is has achieved) to generate more tax revenues, and with reducing and eliminating need for government assistance for 13.5% of its graduates to be profitable for the state (based on total program expenses and graduates from 2018-2021). Because MERS Goodwill supplements costs of the program, an opportunity to illustrate the ROI benefits of the program on state funding would be to report how many students were on government assistance, and how many reduced or eliminated need for their families. The researcher believes if this were to be accomplished, the Excel Center program would showcase to stakeholders the impact is having on graduates with a positive ROI not typically associated with adult education programs.

Who Benefits?

The second research question for this study pertains to who is benefitting from the Missouri Excel Center program. To answer this question, the data and research has been extrapolated to discover what stakeholders have gained from the program and how
completion has generated impact. The first group of stakeholders for this program are its students and graduates.

Graduates and students have benefitted from this program due to an array of different outcomes. But who specifically are the students? The reporting data provided by MERS Goodwill informs that 81% of students are female. There is no supporting data to answer the question why a majority of students are female, however, regardless of the reason, most students are female, of whom the average age is currently 37 years of age. With enrollment in Missouri open to residents without a high school diploma over the age of 21, the average age of students is 16 years older than the minimum for admittance. As people age, the income gap begins to widen with peers who may have had educational and employment opportunities. According to Capital One, a person 16-19 makes on average $609 weekly, whereas individuals 35-44 make approximately double at $1229 weekly (2023). This may be a reason for potential students to seek enrollment as having spent years without having completed high school is motivation for educational and employment advancement. Continuing to assess reporting data on who students are, it is reported that across the district, 58% of students are black/African American, 37% White, 4% Hispanic, and 2.5% multi-racial, and 1% Asian. This demographic unlike sex and age, varies from campus to campus with Columbia and Springfield campuses being the most diverse, St. Louis consisting of primarily Black/African American, and Poplar Bluff having the largest White population.

Having demographic information on the students attending the Excel Center schools in Missouri reveals who the students are that participate in the program. These students who have a persistency of approximately 75% (those who continue enrollment
that have not yet graduated) are benefitting from both increased educational development prior to graduation, social skills, and employment research through provided services. However, aside from the program’s graduates and students, who else is benefitting? Students’ children who are younger than 13 can take advantage of the free on-site daycare facilities. Family members who hear about the program may be motivated to attend based on graduate and student successes. Employees who seek a non-traditional pathway to practice their educational talents also benefit with salaries and compensation. Colleges, universities, workforce development programs, industry certification programs, and employment offices and recruiters also benefit as over 800 graduates will be seeking employment, higher education, or advanced skills training. These graduates add to a skilled workforce, generate revenue for higher education, and can reduce dependency on assistance programs if enrolled. This is ultimately how the state benefits from the program. Increased wages translate to greater tax revenues, reduced government assistance and paves the way for additional funding for new and existing programs.

**Conclusion of Findings**

The Missouri Excel Center program can be deemed as an impactful one. When compared to both minimum wage and average wage of individuals with a “less-than” high school diploma in 2022, the Missouri Excel Center graduates earn higher wages. Completion of the program is the sole variable in increasing the average wages earned over individuals who have not completed high school. Graduates reported having either earned an industry certification or enrolled in college or advanced skills training as a result of the program. Graduates also collectively have a 69% employment rate within six months of graduation. Based on total expenses of the program, if graduates can eliminate
dependency on government assistance, the financial investment by the state would be returned by decreased assistance and increased tax revenues. As it stands MERS Goodwill is a major financial contributor to the Excel Center program, meaning assistance reduction and elimination would generate a positive ROI for the state.

Those who benefit from the program primarily are its students and graduates. However, benefits extend beyond students and graduates. Students’ children can take advantage of the free on-site daycare facilities. Family members who hear about the program may be motivated to attend based on graduate and student successes. Employees benefit with salaries and compensation in addition to meaningful employment experiences. Colleges, universities, workforce development programs, industry certification programs, and employment offices and recruiters also benefit as graduates will be seeking employment, higher education, or advanced skills training. These graduates add to a skilled workforce, generate revenue for higher education, and can reduce dependency on assistance programs if enrolled. This is ultimately how the state benefits from the program. Increased wages translate to greater tax revenues, reduced government assistance and paves the way for additional funding for new and existing programs. But how have the results of the study contributed to existing literature, how can it be used to enhance the educational landscape, and what further research can be conducted to discover more?

**Discussion and Implications**

Graduate impact is a combination of the inputs for the Excel Center program (students that enroll), the activities (tools and services offered), and the outcomes (students perceived impacts on their lives and success as provided by the program). The
graduates were enrolled students who had access to and utilized the services and tools provided to ultimately complete the program. The Missouri Excel Center program is creating impact on a scale that has potential to benefit other areas not previously established across the country. It is achieving this by providing free secondary education to adults over 21, whom 80% qualify for government assistance, and assists in providing avenues for equitable work, higher education, and advanced skills training.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings inform there is in fact demand from adults to not only earn a high school diploma but to seek pathways post-graduation that translate to increased job opportunities, wages, and self-sustainability. The findings support a driving factor for adult high school education would be wage increase as according to the United States Census Bureau 24.9% of adults over age 25 without a diploma are below the federal poverty threshold (2019). The program itself has seen a fraction (over 800 as of 2022) of the 500,000 adults without diplomas in Missouri earn a diploma and achieve educational, employment, and wage benchmarks as established by MERS Goodwill and the state legislature (H.B. 680, 2017, p. 4). The findings support the statistics that a high school diploma is a benchmark in increasing wages, employment opportunity, and higher education (Brough et al., 2021). Translating this into practice, with increases to certification attainment and average wage, the Missouri Excel Center program can utilize this in a larger capacity for marketing toward enrollment by reporting on outcomes.

The demographics also inform on who specifically in Missouri seek an adult high school education. Knowing the demographics can aide the program in continuing to tailor both program services and instruction to engage and empower individuals to achieve
successful completion of the program. The demographic statistics, also support alignment across all Excel Center programs in the United States (Borough et al., 2021). There are similar percentages of gender, race, age, and earnings within six months post-graduation across the country (Borough et al., 2021). This implies that regardless of geographical location, while the Excel Center national program targets areas with a decreased diploma attainment percentage, the demographics are similar. Understanding who the programs serve also is telling of who it is not serving, and leadership can utilize this information to increase outreach to individuals within those demographics or tailor outreach to previously untapped markets.

**Implications for Future Research**

Opportunities for future research on adult high schools and the Excel Center model exist when considering two areas of interest. Complete ROI financial information reporting and the students’ and graduates’ lived experiences with the program. The Missouri Excel Center Program is having an impact on students; however, the potential to inform and attract current and future stakeholders requires additional research to be completed.

From an ROI perspective, the Missouri Excel Center program has an opportunity to illustrate just how much the program can impact state revenues and reduced dependency on government assistance. To do this, Missouri leadership would need to determine and track how many graduates are reducing or eliminating dependency on government assistance and determine how much government assistance students were currently receiving. Based on the projections made earlier, ($262,500 as the remaining lifetime assistance received by a graduate receiving benefits), the Excel Center could
report a positive ROI by demonstrating the incurred costs of the program to state funding are less than the savings and even increased revenues generated by graduates. This would also require more stringent data collection on employment and wage rates. Graduates and students could be required or encouraged to report on a “tracker” that monitors employment, wage, and assistance programs to supply this data. In doing so a statement could be made stating “Graduates of the Missouri Excel Center program in 2024 are making “X” more money than they were prior to graduation, are supplying “X” amount more to the state in income tax and have reduced “X” amount of utility on state financial assistance. In total the ROI for the Excel Center program in 2024 is “X%” illustrating a positive return on state investment.”

Another “untold” portion of data that could be used by the Missouri Excel Center program is to conduct a study on students’ and graduates’ lived experiences. H.B. 680 and collected data informs on a quantitative framework, however hearing from the voices of those enrolled or having completed the program can add the necessary depth using qualitative data and analysis to illustrate program impact. It could also be utilized to ask graduates about what portions of the program have benefitted them most on the path to graduation or help identify areas of the program that need to be developed. The responses could reflect what percentage of students felt a particular activity or service attributed to their greatest perceived impact and what activity or service produced the largest impacts on their lives. The potential for policy change and program development spans beyond immediately offered services using barrier removal tools the program has been developed around (Brough et al., 2021; Cole, 2022; FAQ, 2020; Support Services, 2022).

Qualitative data obtained through surveys and interviews should be collected to widen the
scope of the study beyond strictly numerical statistics. This could be read as “Graduates reported (%) feelings of increased financial stability, (%) actively participated in their children’s education, and (%) felt increased confidence to enroll into advanced skills training or higher educational programs.”
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Declaration of Interest

I have no financial interest or benefit from this publication or research. The only benefit or interest is the fulfillment of requirement for completion of my educational degree, Doctor of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (EdD). I had neither received funding or benefits equating to any monetary value.
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SECTION SIX: SCHOLARLY PRACTITIONER REFLECTION
Dissertation Impact

Reflecting on the dissertation process in its entirety, I cannot help but think about the influences in terms of impact. It seems only fitting that a dissertation revolving around the impacts of an adult education program serves as the frame of reference for my own investigative process for completing this dissertation as well as the impacts on me as an educational leader. To jump to the “findings” of this section as it were, yes, I, the researcher, deem the dissertation to have generated an impact on both me as an educational leader and as a researcher/scholar. I will be breaking down the two major impacts of the University of Missouri-Columbia’s dissertation process for the educational leadership and policy analysis doctorate (EdD) and how it has impacted me as an educational leader and as a researcher/scholar.

Impact as Educational Leader

When first embarking on the EdD journey, I believed this program would propel me in my educational leadership role at the time as the school director for the Springfield, Missouri Excel Center. The EdD program offered new ways of analyzing program theory and how I could utilize knowledge to not only better myself as a leader but the Missouri Excel Center program and all its stakeholders. Fast forward to my current role as an administrator in a traditional charter high school, the skills and logic obtained throughout the dissertation process have changed the way I carry myself as an educational leader.

The first notable impact the dissertation process assisted in developing my abilities as an educational leader was the decision-making and planning process. Caffarella and Daffron illustrated the importance of adopting strategies for execution when planning programs for adult learners. This includes everything from interactive
models, foundational knowledge, and program goals and objectives (2013). This knowledge helped to guide me in what I was searching for in this dissertation. Understanding what a program’s goals or objectives were specifically, allowed me to ask the question “what research could be conducted that would aide leadership in planning programs with knowledge that may be currently unknown?” As an educational leader, the dissertation process served as a reminder of the importance of scholarly research and writing. In the educational landscape, leaders rely on the research and publications of scholars to drive decision making. Initially, I wanted to utilize the dissertation to find ways to advance the Excel Center program. However, to make smart decisions as an educational leader, one must remove themselves from emotional investment inherent in decision making through the process of emotional tagging (Campbell et.al, 2013). Emotional tagging is the process where a feeling, emotion, or event becomes imprinted in an individual’s memory causing the brain to jump to conclusions prior to fully assessing data (Campbell et.al, 2013). This notion required me to prevent emotional investment from influencing my dissertation. Yes, the passion for educational advancement and change in the landscape of poverty can be a driving factor in conducting research, however, it cannot be allowed to control it. By not removing or at least acknowledging these emotional tags, leaders can tend to make quick decisions and assessment without taking the time to understand the data and skew the results unintentionally (Campbell et.al, 2013).

To assist in quality decision making as a leader, one must utilize information in “raw” form to allow others to make their own decisions (Garvin & Roberto, 2013). This notion coupled with an understanding of the pitfalls for poor decision making, sculpted
the process for developing my dissertation. Most notably, understanding the concept that simply because a decision appears to be a success, does not necessarily translate to it being effective. Hammond et al., stated that simply because a program was a success, does not mean that it should be replicated again without research and analysis to understand what made it “successful” or to identify what could make it more efficient (2013). As such, my strategies as an educational leader shifted when conducting research for my dissertation. As an educational leader, assessing policy and practice to inform not solely based on successful outcomes but how outcomes could be enhanced or whether they were an outlier, challenged traditional logic. I began to research and analyze policy and practice, seek understanding of program goals and outcomes, and to detach emotional investment when making decisions for the program.

Another impact the dissertation process has had on me as an educational leader was the change in adaptability to challenges. This change allowed me, through my own experiences, to lead others to adapt and face challenges as a collective in the ever-changing landscape of education. According to Heifetz and Laurie (1997), mobilizing followers to respond to adaptive challenges is the work of a leader. Throughout the dissertation process, the study, methodology, data collection, and analysis had changed due to various developments in the program of study and my own personal educational leadership journey. Recognizing these changes and learning to adapt allowed me to model adaptive leadership and welcome collaborations to enhance effective leadership with quality followership. Similar to the dissertation research study itself, when opening the Excel Center – Phoenix program, there were many changes and operational challenges that required my leadership adaptability and collaboration to see the program
open successfully. Referencing adaptive leadership, Northouse helped explain it best by stating that paths must not be viewed as a static journey for leaders but viewed as an evolution of progress utilizing a web of relationships to accomplish goals (2019).

The concept of path-goal theory attributed to another major impact on my educational leadership as experienced by the dissertation process. This theory describes how individuals require understanding of goals, clarification of the path, and removing obstacles through support to maintain motivation (Northouse, 2019). As voiced by several doctoral students in the EdD cohort, the notion of motivation upon finishing comprehensive exams varied extensively. For some, their momentum carried into their dissertation process with fervor. For others, admittedly myself included, they experienced change, challenges, and struggled to find the motivation to remain determined with a similar passion. Northouse explored path-goal theory and how followers will be motivated to their goals if they feel their efforts are valued and worthwhile (2019). While the cohort consisted of educational leaders, they, like me, are followers as well relying on our dissertation advisors to remind us of our goal and maintain motivation. Finding portions of the dissertation itself and focusing on the “purpose of the study” and “significance” reminded me of what the meaning behind the study represented and translated to motivation. Using this concept, I have had several discussions with my own team of employees about “why” we do what we do, to inspire motivation through followership and the educational change hoped to be achieved through directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership (House & Mitchell, 1974).
Impact as a Researcher/Scholar

While undoubtedly the dissertation process has impacted my educational leadership ability and style, the impact as a researcher and scholar were far greater. When conducting research for the dissertation, I was often reminded of the standards to perform quality, scholarly studies. It was never enough to simply state “what I know.” To maintain research integrity, it was required to utilize a road map illustrating how information was collected, who conducted each part of the research, and how it would be analyzed.

Perhaps the most influential publication providing impact for me as a researcher/scholar was the *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* by Newcomer et al., (2015). In the field of education, program evaluations are often utilized to measure outcomes and performance Newcomer et al., (2015). The dissertation is a program impact evaluation and to complete a scholarly program evaluation required stringent data collection and quality analysis. This process altered the way I understand, conduct, and propose evaluations.

When first determining what type of study was to be conducted, I had to understand the goal of the research. My goal was to increase awareness of adult high school programs, identify policies and practice currently in use, develop a research study aimed at filling gaps in current literature, and aide in program planning for the adult learner. Combined, the goals aligned with performing a program evaluation (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Cafferella & Daffron, 2013; Mertens, 2020; Newcomer et al., 2015). As the initial goal was to conduct a research study on the Missouri Excel Center program, program evaluation would serve as the vessel. However, simply discussing my lived
experience as director, and regurgitating information as I had received it would not suffice in scholarly writing nor as a researcher. Therefore, I began this journey by first understanding what it would require to produce a useful program evaluation, specifically an impact evaluation.

An impact evaluation would assess a program’s effectiveness in reaching its goals by providing quantitative estimates of effects of programs. Newcomer et al. (2018) stated “the purpose of most impact evaluations is to isolate the effects of a program to help officials and citizens to decide whether the program should be continued, improved, or expanded to other areas” (p.137). Newcomer et al. (2015), suggested that there are five main questions to be asked when deciding to commit to a program evaluation.

- Can the results of the evaluation influence decision-making?
- Can it be performed in time to be of use?
- Is the program significant enough?
- Is performance viewed as problematic?
- Where is the program in its stage of development?

As a researcher, I determined all the previous questions merited a response that acknowledged value in the study itself. From there, I spent time discovering how to properly utilize a logic model, performance measurements, utilizing agency records, and engaging stakeholders as evident in the dissertation as proposed by Newcomer et al., (2015).

Another impact the dissertation process had was the process for conducting review of literature and prior publications. As a scholarly practitioner, the responsibility to ascertain existing literature and publication on a given topic rests on the researcher. As
such, I could not simply state what I believed through personal experience, I learned to
discover what literature existed to both illustrate what was known and identify how the
dissertation filled a gap in research (Galvan & Galvan, 2017). As a researcher, I
discovered there was a gap in literature as it pertained to adult high school education. I
then began to isolate the various policies for programs as written in publications ranging
from high school equivalency programs (HSE) to specifically adult high schools
including the Excel Center. Bardach and Patashnik illustrated steps for assembling
evidence relevant to my dissertation such as locating relevant sources, gaining access,
and protecting credibility (2020). A key concept to the research was understanding that
policy and program research is derivative as opposed to original and produced by creative
ideas and data already developed by others (Bardach & Patashnik, 2020). How this
generated impact for me was to understand that while the policies and concept of the
research subject (Missouri Excel Center program) was not new, the specific study would
be and could inform and drive new and further research.

In education, a powerful tool if utilized properly is the survey. It is a way to amass
large quantities of data and information to drive decision making. The dissertation
process has impacted the way I develop surveys and disseminate them to students
currently. Prior to the provision of graduate surveys and responses to contribute to my
dissertation, I developed a survey utilizing methods and measures that would produce
quality data. First, it must be determined if a survey is the appropriate tool for data
collection. As such, in the case of my dissertation research, obtaining information from
potentially hundreds of graduates warranted a tool capable of such magnitude of scale. It
would not be feasible to utilize interviews or focus groups when participants are
numerous in size and geographically distant (Krueger & Casey, 2015). After determining a survey was the proper tool for data collection, a quality survey needs have adequate sampling, be designed for the appropriate participants, and add reliability, validity, and credibility to the study (Fink, 2017). Utilizing these guidelines not only to analyze the survey conducted by the Missouri Excel Center program, but developing one myself, gave me understanding to create quality surveys and utilize them in an educational setting on a regular basis.

Personally, a major challenge in conducting research as a scholar was analyzing data in varied formats. While the majority of my educational experience through the EdD program relied heavily on qualitative or mixed methods reporting, my dissertation evolved to primarily involve quantitative data. As a scholar, I had to “unlearn” what I had learned to reframe the study in a quantitative format. This involved determining the scale of measurement, significance, and inferential statistics without speculation (Mertens, 2019). In short Mertens explained that for findings to have significance, a researcher must utilize a scale in proportion to the data, identify outcome and goal measurement, determine specific parameters for response, and assess generalizability in the results (2019). Following the text as outlined by Mertens (2019), I was able to develop the dissertation study to utilize archival data, supplement with literature and prior research to create findings that can be presented to stakeholders. This process has impacted me as a researcher and scholar because in an educational environment, I often must take information such as students’ grades, attendance data, and assessment performance, and report findings to organizational leadership. Without utilizing these processes in my
dissertation, I would not have had the firsthand experience required to develop my skills utilizing quantitative research and analysis in an educational setting.

**Summary of Dissertation Impact**

It is difficult, to say the least, to identify how the dissertation process has impacted me separately as an educational leader and as a researcher/scholar. In truth, my lived experience through this process has had an iterative effect where my perceived impacts as a researcher/scholar have developed my leadership and vice versa. For example, understanding how to conduct a program evaluation has influenced how I execute staff and student evaluations or how I communicate results from organizational evaluations to my team thus strengthening my leadership abilities. As an educational leader, identifying and understanding the question “who stands to benefit” allows me to focus on stakeholders impacted by not only the evaluation process, but the results at the end of the research process (Newcomer et al., 2015). Perhaps it is told best by DeMartino and Renn who stated that the dissertation is the pinnacle and culmination of all studies in a doctoral program such as the EdD that not only sees its students utilize practical practice in conducting research, but also in generating quality leaders (2023). For me, as my lived experience, I can affirm that the dissertation process was in fact a summation of all the coursework, collaborations, and techniques that the EdD program exposed to me. I intend to extend and expand upon the specific methods of research, analysis, and presentation of findings within my dissertation to my passion for education as a leader in the hopes that I can contribute to the development and advancement of the art of learning.
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VITA

Joseph W. Cole was born in Jackson, Michigan. After relocating to Missouri, he spent most of his childhood in rural Southeast Missouri before relocating to the greater Saint Louis area. It was there he graduated high school and developed a passion for education. He obtained his bachelor’s degree in Secondary Social Studies Education from the University of Missouri – Columbia, his master’s degree in Education from Central Methodist University, and upon completion, his doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia.

Cole has been employed as a social studies educator in Missouri public schools for both middle and high schools before becoming a school director for the Missouri and Arizona Excel Center program. He is currently an administrator for a college preparatory STEM focused charter high school.